Raw Reality

Lee Daniels confronts his demons by caring for his communities.

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It’s a lucky day. Lee Daniels does not like doing interviews, and he rarely grants them. His aversion is the result of having been misquoted and misinterpreted in the past. “It’s hard to be vulnerable, so it’s easy to be guarded,” says Daniels from his Beverly Hills home. “Vulnerability comes from a place of truth.”

Vulnerability certainly is on display in most of Daniels’s work, which includes the feature films Shadowboxer(his directorial debut), Precious, The Paperboy, The Butler and 2021’s The United States vs. Billie Holiday, for which Andra Day earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress, as well as his work for the small screen: the wildly popular series Empire and its spin-off, Star. “In my work,” says Daniels, “that’s where I feel safe.”

Daniels, however, does not want viewers to feel safe when watching his work. He addresses issues that have been purposely flung into the closet—rape, government corruption, suicide, racism, sexual abuse and AIDS. The comfort of denial is not an option.

“I just birth a piece of my soul, and I try to heal with each child,” he says. The healing refers to overcoming his challenging past.

In 2009, Daniels brought AIDS to the screen through the 16-year-old character Claireece “Precious” Jones, played by newcomer Gabourey Sidibe, in Precious.

Precious received six Oscar nominations, including Best Director and Best Picture, and got two wins: Mo’Nique won for Best Supporting Actress, and Geoffrey Fletcher won for Best Adapted Screenplay. Fletcher was the first African American to receive an Oscar for writing.

Gabourey Sidibe (left) and Lee Daniels in 2009 in Spain to promote Precious Juan Herrero/EPA/Shutterstock

Daniels's vulnerability is also on display during the Zoom interview for this profile. At age 62, he lights up the screen. He is cool, calm, centered and, at times, quite humorous, which liberates his trademark laugh.

Daniels agreed to this interview to address the insufficient discussion about HIV. "People don't talk about this disease enough," he says. "I don't think this generation of the LGBTQ community is aware of the great people we've lost."

He gazes off briefly, and then he continues. "All this has happened because of the lives we've lost due to HIV, and the impact it had on the world and, in particular, my world. The HIV pandemic is extremely important to me. It's as important to me as the Holocaust. It's as important to me as slavery."

Then he presses, "I can do more through my work." And he is. An HIV-related television show and a film are in development, though both projects are on hold due to COVID-19.

The TV show is a comedy. Comedy?! "That was a way to confront our grief—through laughter. Many of my white friends and my Black friends who died of AIDS went laughing, and we laughed with them to cover the pain." Daniels not only knows about pain but also about abuse, addiction, racism and grief. "There is humor in dark and light in dark."

He is sketching out a remake of Terms of Endearment, starring Oprah Winfrey in the role for which Shirley MacLaine won a 1983 Oscar for Best Actress. It will differ in some ways from the original, including the fact that the character played by Debra Winger in the original will be dying of AIDS.

Daniels is also piecing together a limited series about Sylvester, the Queen of Disco. The project will depict the disco era, the onset of AIDS and the 1988 death of Sylvester from AIDS-related illness.

“I don’t think there has been an ultimate piece [about AIDS], especially from the Black lens,” says Daniels. “AIDS has affected nearly every one of my Black friends.”

Daniels was raised in Philadelphia along with four other siblings by a mother who worked various jobs and a policeman father. Early signs indicated that his life was not going to be easy.

At age 5, his grandmother—with whom he was tremendously close—called him a faggot. But her intention was to use the slur in good humor. She told him to “live by your truth, then you’ll be destined for greatness.” When violence dominated his home life, he would often take solace from her.

He often bore the brunt of his father’s anger. When Daniels was age 6, his dad threw him into an alley trash can after seeing him wearing his mom’s red high heels. Not coincidentally, in season 1 of Empire, Terrence Howard’s character throws his gay son, Jamal, portrayed by Jussie Smollett, into the trash.

When Daniels was a preteen, his father discovered him making out with another boy. “That’s one time he didn’t beat me,” Daniels notes. “He just gave me a look. Then he said, ‘I never want to catch you with another man. I brought you into this world, and I will take you out of this world.’”

Thanks to that declaration, Daniels abstained from sex for years. “When I did finally sleep with a man,” Daniels quips, “I just knew that the house was going to come down on me like it did the bad witch [in The Wizard of Oz], and I would die.” His dad believed that AIDS was God’s way of punishing gays.

Unfortunately, many people still feel that way today. “As you see,” Daniels remarks, “I felt AIDS was our fate as gay men, since it had been so ingrained in me.” His father was killed in the line of duty when Daniels was a teen. Daniels admits to being relieved at first. In time, he learned to forgive his father.

Daniels’s mother was more liberal, embracing him when he came out. But when she got word back then that most people contracting AIDS were gay men, she made it perfectly clear that he was not welcome at home. “I have called her out on it since, but back then, she said, ‘Please do not come around me.’” He breaks. “I’m friends with her now—God bless her.”

Daniels earned a scholarship to radnor High School in Pennsylvania, from which he graduated in 1978. He then went to Lindenwood University in Missouri but found it didn’t suit him. In 1980, he

moved to Los Angeles.

Daniels soon heard that a paperboy from his hometown had died of a disease then called gay-related immune deficiency (GRID). Daniels remembered him from his own days as a newspaper delivery boy (his first job). “He was a wonderful guy! He was my age, around 18 or 19. When I was told that he’d died from this unknown virus, I thought, What the hell?”

For three years after the paperboy’s death, Daniels didn’t hear more about GRID. “Then came the tsunami,” he says. He began losing friends and boyfriends to it. Some died in his arms. Daniels began to think that his father had been right.

Shortly after Daniels arrived in LA, he got a job as a receptionist at a nursing agency. Before too long, he opened his own nursing agency, specializing in care for those with GRID. He was 20. His was the first nursing agency to be under contract with the newly established AIDS Project Los Angeles, now known as APLA Health.

“Not many people know of my early beginnings,” Daniels says. “That’s a different life, and something I’m proud of.” He holds a brief silence before continuing. “It was horrifying. We weren’t sure how you could contract it. The women who worked for me weren’t afraid. I was blessed with having them in my employ. We took care of many people that died.”

His experience with Jimmy, a close platonic friend, was a dark turning point. “He contracted the virus. His parents wouldn’t take him in. He was very sick, so a friend and I got a taxi and dropped him off at the Cedars-Sinai emergency room. We just left him there. I don’t even think he was conscious at that point. After we got home, my friend said, ‘Do you want to try freebase?’ I answered, ‘Sure, what is that?’ I needed anything that was going to take away the pain.”

Daniels continues, “I forgot about Jimmy. We had fun. Then I became promiscuous and frequented the bathhouses. I was looking to die,” he asserts. “I purposely tried to get AIDS.”

His drug use involved crystal meth, freebase cocaine, crack and ecstasy. But Daniels stayed away from heroin, as he witnessed the decline and death of some Philly folks who used it.

HIV tests weren’t widely available until 1985. It took Daniels about another seven years to get tested. He says, “I didn’t want to know.” He remains HIV negative.

What was it that saved Daniels, a man who now has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame? Simply put, his children, Clara and Liam.

In 1996, Daniels was celebrating at the White Party in Palm Springs, California, a favorite writing locale of his. The annual LBGTQ event is attended by mostly gay men and raises money for various HIV and AIDS groups.

While on the dance floor, partying high on ecstasy, Daniels received a call from his mother. She told him that his brother was in jail and that his girlfriend had just had twins and could not care for

the babies. She asked Daniels to adopt them.

Daniels balked. “I didn’t want children at all! I was having the time of my life. I was furious.” But his partner at the time, casting executive Billy Hopkins, did want children and convinced Daniels to adopt Clara and Liam. In the process, Daniels and Hopkins might have become the first gay couple to adopt in Pennsylvania, where the kids were born. Today, the twins are 26. Clara is a budding producer and has worked on Daniels’s films. Liam is a model and a DJ.

Daniels realized that to take care of these kids he had to be present. “I see now that it was God taking care of me.” The White Party was the last time Daniels did drugs—that is, until a few years ago after the adoption. Daniels and Hopkins broke up, and the kids lived with Hopkins. Daniels found that being away from the twins led him to use again. Then he ceased.

That was six years ago, while he was developing The United States vs. Billie Holiday. “I wanted to be clear and present [for this project],” Daniels confides. “Everything Billie wasn’t, I wanted to be, and I wanted to honor her through sobriety.”

Enter Jahil Fisher, Daniels’s partner of seven years, who provides balance. Fisher, 40, is a stylist. The couple met at the Chateau Marmont, where Daniels was living while writing the script for The Butler.

Lee Daniels at the 2021 Met Gala in New York CityEvan Agostini/Invision/AP/Shutterstock

Nowadays, when doubt consumes Daniels, Fisher reminds him of his many accomplishments, including helping the first Black woman to receive an Academy Award for Best Actress. Halle Berry won for her role in Monster's Ball, which Daniels's production company produced in 2001.

The support notwithstanding, doubt still resurfaces. "It's daily recovery. Even with this conversation now, it makes me think, Lee, you are sane. You're good. You're in a great place."

Despite life's turmoil, Daniels has been a dedicated philanthropist. In 2016, the Black AIDS Institute honored him as one of its Heroes in the Struggle. Also in 2016, Daniels spoke about gun violence at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia and introduced survivors of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando. In 2018, Queen Latifah presented him with the Award of Courage at the 20th annual gala for amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research.

He has also supported such organizations as the Ghetto Film School, the Human Rights Campaign, Oceana, Oxfam and the Humane Society of the United States.

"I have to give back," Daniels declares. "I feel an obligation to my friends, to my partners, to people I've held while they transitioned [out of this life]." He pauses. "The truth is, I need to. Otherwise, I couldn't live with myself."

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