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Precious Star Claims the Spotlight

By Emily Wilson

With the confidence of a seasoned performer, Gabourey Sidibe portrays a particular character with universal appeal. The movie a Sapphire novel, opens in limited release on Friday.

In *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire*, Gabourey Sidibe plays the title role of the obese Harlem teenager caught cycle of abuse, incest and poverty. *The New York Times*, among others, raved about this, her first film performance, calling it "dazzling."

Sidibe, who knows she is no one's idea of a movie star, says the best thing about actually starring in a movie is the example it sets for her two younger sisters, 13-year-old twins, who sleep in the same Harlem bedroom she did growing up.

"What is so great about me doing this film," she says, is that "I'm an actual example for them to see that they can be whatever they want to be, no matter what they look like. When you think Hollywood actress, you don't think of a girl that looks like me, but now you can. There's hope for my sisters."

Out in San Francisco for the screening of the film at the opening night of the Mill Valley Film Festival, Sidibe, along with director Lee Daniels and Paula Patton who plays Precious' teacher at an alternative school, all seem a little surprised and gratified at the attention to their film, which has won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and the People's Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival.

Daniels says he appreciates the accolades, but what really thrilled him was Sapphire's reaction. She felt the book should stay a book, not a movie, and it took Daniels eight years to change her mind.

"I had to explain to her, 'Listen, your book is etched in stone for forever. Nobody is going to say the book sucks because the r You still created a frigging masterpiece,'" Daniels says. "At the end of the day, my biggest award was her loving this movie. Si my arms and cried."

Daniels doesn't seem poised to do a romantic comedy any time soon. He produced *The Woodsman* about a pedophile and *Mc* about a racist white prison guard's affair with the African American wife of the last person he killed. He directed *Shadowboxer* a stepmother and her stepson who are lovers and assassins. Clearly, Daniels doesn't shy away from challenging subjects. But which deals with illiteracy, rape, abuse and poverty—none of them topics known for being big box office draws—seems like it most challenging one yet. *The New York Times Magazine* recently ran a cover story called "The Audacity of 'Precious'" that ask America ready for a movie about an obese Harlem girl raped and impregnated by her abusive father?"

It seems we are. One reason for all the attention to the movie may be all the big names associated with it: Tyler Perry and Or are executive producers; the comedian Mo'Nique plays the abusive mother; Mariah Carey is a social worker; and Lenny Kravitz as a nurse.

But Patton, who plays Precious' teacher, Ms. Rain, thinks there's a reason other than star power why audiences have embrace She says *Precious*, in spite of telling such a specific story, universally speaks to people who feel cast aside and ignored. As an she tells a story about an older white man who stood up after the screening at Sundance and said he had never cried at a film the movie told his story.

"I didn't know an audience like that could embrace an all-black film and give it the love that they gave it, and it just blew me . says. "It was very healing for me as a black woman in America."

Patton says she hopes audiences caught up in Precious' story will become a little more compassionate and understanding. Sid the same thing. A confident, cheerful 26-year-old, the actress is nothing like her character, but she says she could relate to her felt about her looks.

"A lot of my life I've been told I would never amount to anything unless I lost weight and that I can't be pretty because I have skin," she says. "I've been told that by my own community, by my own family. There have been days when I looked in the mi wished I had lighter skin, I wished that I had prettier hair, I wished I were thinner. Precious, when she looks in the mirror, sh white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, and I've gone there myself, but that was what my life was like at sixteen."

In the movie, Precious starts opening up when she experiences some kindness from Ms. Rain and begins learning to read and tell her story. Her life doesn't become a fairy tale, but she feels more comfortable with herself.

"Towards the end of the film Precious does finally see herself in the mirror and not a blonde model, and that speaks volumes Sidibe says. "At some point I too figured out that my beauty doesn't depend on being lighter skinned with wavy hair. None of because my beauty is my own."



Gabourey Sidibe stars as Claireece "Precious" Jo credit: Anne Marie Fox

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