

# CREATOR OF WORLDS

BY ANGELA WATERCUTTER



With *A Wrinkle in Time*, director Ava DuVernay merges sci-fi's embrace of the Other with her own vision for a better, more inclusive future.

Photograph by Art Streiber

ate fall in the redwood forests of Northern California, it gets cold. Not wrap-yourself-in-furs cold—we're still talking 51 degrees—but the kind of cold that demands layers, lest it sink into your bones. Nevertheless, in November 2016, when I visited her movie set near Eureka, director Ava DuVernay was coatless. Just a thermal with a cotton shirt over it, jeans, and a knit hat. The young stars of DuVernay's film were in very lightweight shirts, pretending to be lost in unfamiliar (and, one assumes, warmer) woods, and she wasn't about to let them be the only ones on her set enduring the chill.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but every time they have to have their jackets off, she takes her jacket off," producer Jim Whitaker whispered to me as DuVernay called "action!" in the distance. "This is so typical." Whitaker, of course, is supposed to say things like this. And DuVernay, a former Hollywood publicist skilled in sending a message, knows which notes to hit. From what I've seen here on set—her playful and encouraging interactions with her stars, the diversity of her crew, the summer-camp-with-Disney-money conviviality—this act of goose-bumped solidarity is an apt metaphor for the spirit DuVernay is bringing to her adaptation of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

If you don't remember what you read in middle school, *A Wrinkle in Time* is the story of a young girl named Meg Murry on a mission to save her scientist father, who has been taken prisoner by a dark force in the universe intent on crushing free thought and free will. Along the way she's assisted by her classmate Calvin O'Keefe, brother Charles Wallace, and three celestial beings—Mrs. Who, Mrs. Which, and Mrs. Whatsit—who help her jump, or tesser, through space-time. The story is the same in DuVernay's version for Disney, but there are a couple of significant new wrinkles. Since her first feature film in 2008, DuVernay has used whatever success she's attained to give other women and people of color opportunities on both sides of the camera. So in 2016, when Disney announced that she would direct *A Wrinkle in Time*, and DuVernay became the first African American woman to helm a $100 million-plus movie (but "not the first capable of doing so," she later noted on Twitter, "not by a long shot")—she promised a new vision of the original. "You kind of have to remix the book," DuVernay told *The Wall Street Journal*. The casting made clear that she was making good on that promise: Meg is now biracial, played by 14-year-old Storm Reid, and Mindy Kaling and Oprah Winfrey play Mrs. Who and Mrs. Which, respectively.

DuVernay isn't known as a genre director particularly. Her movies and TV shows have been firmly grounded in race, power, politics, and family narratives. But her overall project, building a better world for people of color, doesn't so much overlap as interleave with one of science fiction's overall projects: world-building. Sci-fi has always been as much an exercise in thought experimentation as an arena for spectacle, for rocket ships and ray guns.

In the most narrowly defined Western canon, the fascist overlords of dystopian states get challenged by people of the land, farmboys who believe in and benefit from deeper cultural ideals. Science fiction can shake that narrative like a snow globe. It makes room for underdogs and Others. It's a genre where people can build futures, alternate realities, and then press "play" to see how they work out. DuVernay sees that potential. "She's captured the essence of the book—the characters, the story, the themes—it's just that they're reimagined visually a little different," says producer Catherine Hand, who has spent decades trying to bring *Wrinkle* to theaters. "How Madeleine L'Engle pictured it back in 1962? We've all changed."

The Hollywood that *Wrinkle* tessered into has changed too, albeit slowly. Women, especially young women, are rarely at the center of the story. Of the 100 top-grossing films of 2016, there were only eight female leads or coleads between the ages of six and 20. You know how many weren't white? Two. A study by the Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative at USC's Annenberg School calls this an "invisibility crisis"—one that leads to women (and especially young women of color) seeing few reflections of themselves in pop culture, while white boys grow up seeing themselves as heroes on billboards and multiplex walls. When Winfrey accepted the Cecil B. DeMille award at the Golden Globes in January, she opened her speech by describing her awestruck little-girl self seeing Sidney Poitier receive an Oscar and noted that "it is not lost on me that at this moment there are some little girls" watching her be celebrated too.

For DuVernay, putting black, brown, and Asian people onscreen is essential—but so is challenging the systems that led to their exclusion. She does this in her choice of subjects: Her Oscar-nominated documentary *13th* traces a line from slavery to the mass incarceration of black men; her film *Selma*, while in Hollywood terms a Martin Luther King Jr. biopic, was also a critique of the laws and social structures that deprived black Southerners of their voting rights. Her challenge to Hollywood systems is also borne out in the way she runs her projects. Only women direct her TV series, *Queen Sugar*. Array, the collective she founded in 2010, helps female filmmakers and filmmakers of color get their movies distributed. "Ava doesn't just talk inclusion," Winfrey says. "She lives it."

Late in the afternoon that November day in the woods, as DuVernay directed Reid through a series of reaction shots, she ended every one with an



PORTRAIT: ART STREIBER/AUGUST IMAGES; HAIR STYLIST: LULU HOLMES; WARDROBE STYLIST: JASON BOLDEN; MAKEUP STYLIST: UZO

encouraging word to "Stormy," the nickname she'd given the young star. Despite the chill, fading daylight, and the fact that she was working with actors who have to spend at least part of their day being tutored, everything got done on time. Back in her trailer, discussing her non-*Wrinkle* responsibilities—Array had made two acquisitions since production began, and *Queen Sugar*'s season one finale was the next day—you'd never know she was feeling the pressure of a massive Disney production. So I asked her if she was. "I wonder if my male counterparts are asked that," she said thoughtfully but firmly, leaning forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I really do."

## DUVERNAY,

NOW 45, GREW UP IN COMPTON, CALIFORNIA, RAISED BY her mother, Darlene, a preschool teacher, and father, Murray Maye, who owned a carpet and flooring business. One of five children, she made up "epic" stories with her Barbies ("soap operas with different locations and cliff-hangers—that's when I started playing with character"), but she wasn't blind to what was happening outside her door. Police were a constant, feared presence in her neighborhood—and talks of arrests and prison were common. Her father was from Alabama, near Selma, and conveyed to her the region's significance for the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

DuVernay attended Saint Joseph High School, an all-girls Catholic school in nearby Lakewood. As a senior, she became the school's second black student-body president and its first black homecoming queen. Terri Mendoza is the school's longtime principal, and a teacher before that; when I asked about her former student, she gives a list of attributes—reliable, helpful, able to bring out others' talents—that continues for so long she ends it by laughing and saying, "I'm probably making a case for her canonization."

After high school DuVernay went to UCLA, where she majored in African American studies and English. Originally she thought she'd pursue journalism, but after an internship for CBS News that had her going through the trash of a juror in the O.J. Simpson trial, she changed her mind. Instead she went into film publicity. She eventually launched her own firm, the DuVernay Agency, in 1999 and served as a consultant on movies including *Spy Kids* and *Collateral*.

DuVernay was good at promoting movies, but she wanted to be making them. She figured she wouldn't be given the opportunity, so she created it for herself. "I didn't get the playbook," she says. "They weren't handing those out in Compton." She moved fast. In 2008, at age 35, she released *This Is the Life*, a documentary about the underground hip-hop scene at LA's Good Life Cafe, and *My Mic Sounds Nice*, about female MCs, in 2010. That same year, using $50,000 she'd been saving to buy a house, she released her first narrative feature, *I Will Follow*, about a woman grieving the death of her aunt. Roger Ebert called it "the kind of film black filmmakers are rarely able to get made these days, offering roles for actors who remind us here of their gifts."

It was DuVernay's next feature, however, that got everyone else's attention. *Middle of Nowhere*, about a woman trying to navigate having a boyfriend in prison, was made for $200,000 and nabbed DuVernay the directing award for a US drama at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival. It also starred a then-up-and-coming actor named David Oyelowo, who was about to be in Lee Daniels' *The Butler* with Winfrey. At the time, Oyelowo had been trying to make a movie about Martin Luther King Jr. with himself as the lead. He implored Winfrey to check out *Middle of Nowhere*. She watched it; it reminded her of the formation of another relationship.



DuVernay (right) with her young star Reid on the set of *Wrinkle*.

"When I first met and interviewed Maya Angelou," Winfrey says, "I said, 'Give me five minutes, I promise it won't be more than five minutes.' I finished in four minutes and 50-some seconds, and she said 'Who are you, girl?' I felt the same thing when I saw *Middle of Nowhere*. 'Who are you, girl, that did this? How did you do that?' "

Winfrey went on to coproduce, and costar in, DuVernay's *Selma*—an 128-minute retelling of the efforts of King and the people of Alabama to help secure the Voting Rights Act of 1965. (DuVernay brought her father along while scouting locations.) The movie received a 2015 Academy Award nomination for Best Picture, but neither DuVernay nor Oyelowo were nominated for Best Director or Best Actor; those snubs were galvanizing factors in the #OscarsSoWhite movement, which took Hollywood to task for not acknowledging creators of color. About a year later, the Academy of Motion Picture

*Senior associate editor* **ANGELA WATERCUTTER** *(@waterslicer) wrote about* Black Panther *in 26.02.*

ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/© 2017 DISNEY ENTERPRISES INC.

Arts and Sciences announced a series of measures to better promote diversity and inclusion among its Oscar voters; "Shame is a helluva motivator," DuVernay tweeted.

After *Selma*, the scouts came calling. DuVernay was put in the running to direct *Black Panther* but passed, and it went to Ryan Coogler, the director of *Fruitvale Station* and *Creed*. There was talk that she might direct a sci-fi thriller. Big studios lined up to woo her, but many of their offers sought her skills as a director only, not a collaborator. "With other projects that I've been looking at, it wasn't really about putting my stamp on it," she says. "It was being the custodian of someone else's vision."

So when Lisa Nishimura, head of Netflix's docs division, told DuVernay she could make a movie about anything she wanted, she seized the chance. She immediately knew what it would be about: incarceration. The resulting film, *13th*, is an unblinking look at the prison industrial complex through the prism of race. It was widely, critically praised. And inspiring too: In early 2017, art collector Agnes Gund sold a Roy Lichtenstein painting from her personal collection for $165 million and used $100 million of the proceeds to start fund for criminal justice reform. It was partly because she'd seen *13th*.

Bypassing a theatrical release for the relative small potatoes of a streaming service might seem counterintuitive, especially when you've got the wind of an Oscar nomination at your back. But going with Netflix meant the movie got in front of a lot more people than an art-house run ever would have. A blockbuster would reach even more people, of course—and by the time *13th* premiered, her opportunity to make a studio movie had already arrived. In February 2016, after overtures from Disney, news broke that she signed on to make *A Wrinkle in Time*.

She agreed to it in part, she says, because she sits on the board of Sundance with Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures production president Sean Bailey. When DuVernay was learning about Hollywood, she witnessed cronyism born of common experience and casual proximity. "All the social ways that people know each other in the industry, I live a different life," she says. "There are no agents that are just my homies. The wives who know each other, the kids who know each other. I'm outside of that." But she had found a crony in Bailey; she knew he would let her make the kind of movie she wanted to make, with the people she wanted to make it with.

DuVernay prepped *Wrinkle* while editing *13th*. While she was finishing that, she was also filming and producing *Queen Sugar*, the family drama she brought to Winfrey's OWN network. The schedule, she admits now, was "ridiculous." It was also a coping mechanism. Her father—the man who grew up near Selma and introduced DuVernay to Alabama's history—died in March 2016. Work was her distraction.

"I look at myself during that time and I would drag home, so utterly bone-tired," she says. "I would come in the door, put on my robe, and collapse in utter exhaustion and wouldn't have to think."

## THE FUTURE

OF FILMMAKING LIVES IN DUVERNAY'S IPHONE.

It's rose gold and seemingly always at her side, even if it remains mostly facedown during conversation. She's excellent on Twitter, as any of her 1.6 million followers will tell you. She treated her 822,000 (and growing) Instagram followers to stories as she traveled the world making *A Wrinkle in Time*: selfies with Reese Witherspoon, who plays Mrs. Whatsit; views from the set in New Zealand; the dance moves of her young stars. But more than that, her contact list is now a who's-who of the movie world vanguard.

"I'm proud that in this phone is almost every black filmmaker that's actively making films in the last 10, 15 years," she said, sitting in her trailer on the *Wrinkle* set in the redwoods, rolling the device around in her palm. "And whether they're my close homie, like Ryan Coogler, or whether they're someone that I don't know that well but I like their films a lot, like Barry Jenkins, they're there." (She has industry friends, but they're mostly creators—not gatekeepers.) Jenkins' film, *Moonlight*, won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

One thing those filmmakers share with DuVernay is an emphasis on telling well-rounded stories about people of color. She went to great lengths in *Selma* to portray King as a powerful leader, but also a flawed one: unfaithful to his wife even as he shepherds a movement. With *Queen Sugar* she tackles family, class, sexuality, and politics with a nuance that's rarely seen on television. "There has been this sense that black art, black experience, black politics are only localizable, not generalizable," says Robert Patterson, chair of the African American studies program at Georgetown University. DuVernay helps "people to think about the universality of the black experience."

With *A Wrinkle in Time*, DuVernay, who is working from a script by *Frozen*'s Jennifer Lee, is injecting that universality into a text that didn't necessarily anticipate it. "Folks shouldn't expect a page-for-page re-creation of the book," DuVernay says.

I LIVE A DIFFERENT LIFE

"They should expect a page-for-page embracing of what I feel the author meant—which is a story about an underdog."

Admittedly, what L'Engle meant to say with *A Wrinkle in Time* has perplexed people for decades. Her manuscript confused some publishers, who couldn't figure out if it was for kids or adults; 26 of them ultimately rejected it. It was sci-fi with a young girl at its center, which was mostly unheard of in the early 1960s. It imagined a world in which the themes of science and religion could coexist, making it too religious for some and blasphemous for others. It's been banned off and on for years, and it's also a beloved best-seller. The book is, and L'Engle was, an outsider that succeeded.

That's genre fiction for you. What was, half a century ago, unthinkable—a counterculture rescue quest through time and space with a girl in the lead—is today a recognized norm. Science fiction, long derided for childishness and subcultural irrelevance, is now mainstream Hollywood's primary output: 14 of the top 20 grossing films of all time are science fiction or fantasy.

The raw stuff of science fiction is imagination and the game of what-if, but the infrastructure upon which that gets hung is metaphor. There's a reason LGBTQ kids latch onto the X-Men, with their otherness that manifests at puberty, and a generation of women still marshals an inner Buffy in times of crisis. Literary sci-fi has always been further along than TV and movies in bringing color into that palette. Writers like Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler (and, more recently, Nnedi Okorafor, N. K. Jemisin, and others) all used the wide-open spaces of sci-fi to reposition people of color within narratives and to construct all new cultures for them. And if the backdrop of these stories is dystopia? No matter. Tomorrow might look worse than today, sci-fi tells us, but it will always allow for us to be better than we are now.

The representation that DuVernay rightly champions has gotten a toehold, now that this kind of world-building is coming to multiplexes. Star Wars cast panels look like UN delegations. Even comic books, while once existing on the fringes of what was considered science fiction, have followed suit. *A Wrinkle in Time* opens the month after *Black Panther*—a Marvel movie set in an Afrofuturist utopia with an almost entirely African American (and African) cast.

All of these properties are popular, mainstream juggernauts. Sci-fi's faintly naive experimentation with the idea of human progress for everyone has spread to … well, everyone. "The book, the story, is taking on a different context now with the present times," DuVernay says. "What we talk about when we talk about light and darkness, when we talk about a world divided."

When marginalized people enter Hollywood, they're told they have to adapt to the old guard's ways, instead of the system adapting to include them, according to Victoria Mahoney, who got her first TV directing job from DuVernay in *Queen Sugar*'s first season. The two are now working on an adaptation of Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. "Everything they told us was about 'fight for yourself'—that's what the industry says by default," Mahoney says. "Now there's an entire generation looking at Ava, and the subtext they're getting is 'look out for each other.' She is the truth to the lies we've been told."

Mindy Kaling says that when DuVernay approached her about playing a role in *Wrinkle*, it was one of the first times she'd ever been sought out for a part. Kaling had created her own lane with *The Mindy Project*, a sitcom she wrote, produced, and starred in. "When you're so used to creating your own roles," she says, "it was very flattering and exciting."

This style of collaboration, of mentorship, recalls the history of black women's organizing and community-building, says Jacqueline Stewart, professor of cinema and media studies at the University of Chicago. "What's important about the kind of work that Ava DuVernay is making is the structural analysis she's bringing into view: How does Hollywood work, exactly? How do we find spaces here?" Stewart adds. The results could be "a more sustained support for black filmmaking beyond a 5- to 10-year window."

DuVernay intends to be part of it. She's slated to make a movie for HBO about the 1973 Palace of Versailles fashion show, a momentous night when American clothing designers and black fashion models upended the conventions of the style world. For Netflix, she's following up *13th* with a five-part narrative film about the Central Park Five, the young men wrongly convicted of attacking and raping a woman in New York in the 1980s. She's also reportedly working on a film for Netflix starring Rihanna and Lupita Nyong'o to be written by *Insecure*'s Issa Rae, based on an idea birthed on Twitter. Three different decades, three different underdog stories, all brought to you by the same underdog hero. Just because we'll be better in the future doesn't mean we have to wait to start.



# COLOPHON

## EPIC ODYSSEYS THAT HELPED GET THIS ISSUE OUT

A three-week trip by train, bus, and plane with two kids through the bomb cyclone while editing a 10,000-word cover story; dodging perpetually gridlocked SF traffic by bike; finishing N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy—stunning!; my lifelong quest to figure out what's wrong with my gut; 25 years with PTSD, fighting back toward the light; helping my nephew move into off-campus housing and wishing we had brought hazmat suits; the Gear team walking an aggregate of more than 100 miles in four days at CES; watching dear friends journey into parenthood—with twins; Phish's 12/30/17 version of "Down With Disease" at Madison Square Garden; "the HR Benefits Department is somehow on this thread, could we please be removed?"; crossing the street at CES by going through three casinos, stopping for ice cream (mint chip), and arriving 45 minutes late to an appointment that was a quarter of a mile away.

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