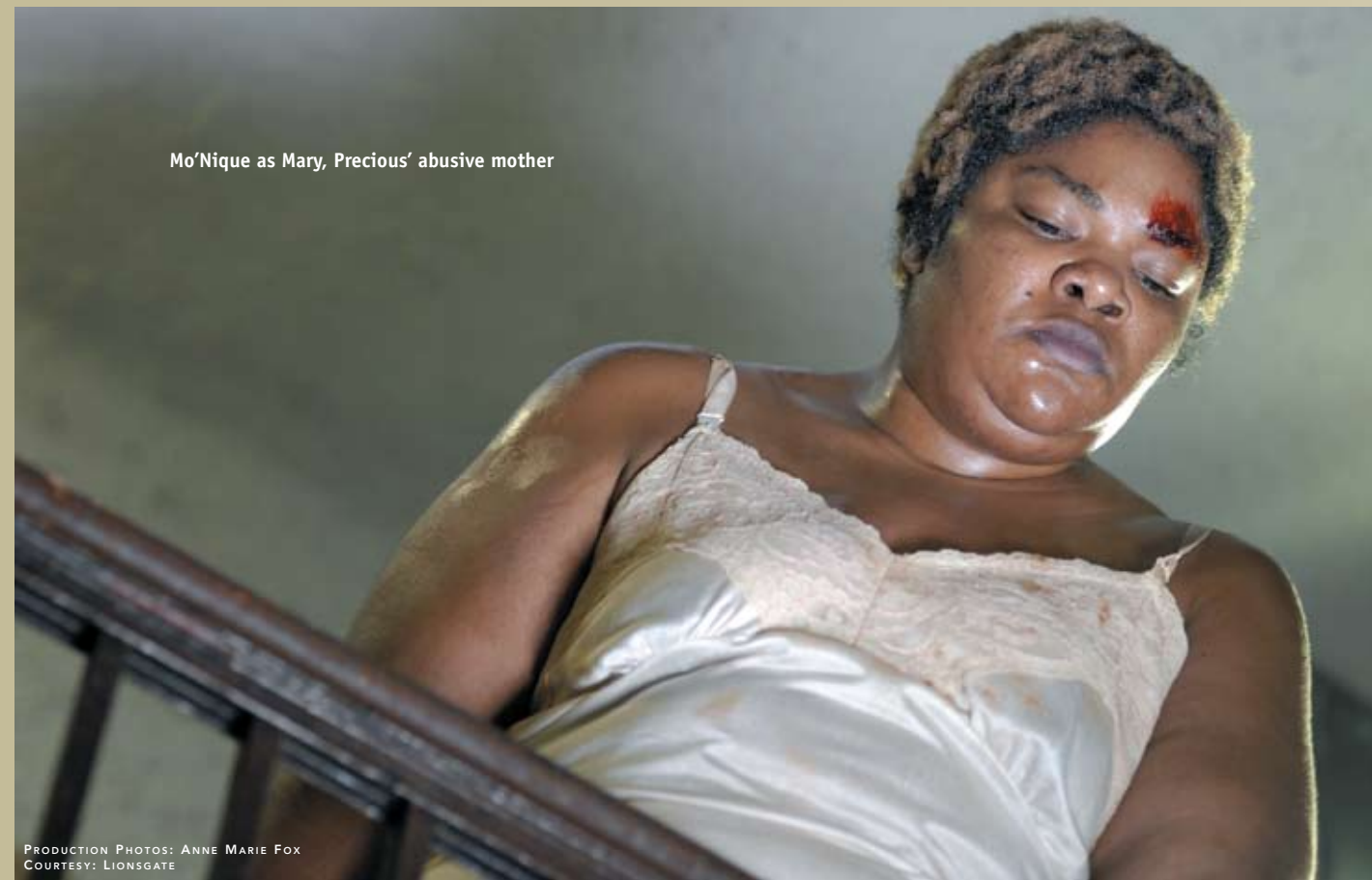


Script to Screen: *Precious*

Backed by director Lee Daniels and screenwriter Geoffrey Fletcher, a brutal but hopeful memoir of a young Harlem woman became the most celebrated film at Sundance.



Mo'Nique as Mary, Precious' abusive mother

PRODUCTION PHOTOS: ANNE MARIE FOX
COURTESY: LIONSGATE

When do movies rise to the level of art? The very terms “art film” and “art house” imply that movies with artistic ambition are a genre separate from, well, pretty much everything.

The term “art film” does seem to imply a genre, though, conjuring images of subtitles, avant-garde cinematic techniques, experimental filmmaking, or musty historical dramas. *Precious*: Based on the Novel *Push* by Sapphire is

none of those things. Yet if one of the marks of true art is the power to make the viewer see things differently, then *Precious* must surely qualify as one of the year's most artistic films.

It offers up one of the movies' least likely heroines: Claireece “Precious” Jones is obese, already a welfare mother at 16, and pregnant again, a behavior problem in school, sullen, and nearly silent. From the outside, she appears to be on her way to living up to the

parasitic “welfare queen” image that helped fuel America's Reagan-era political shift to the right.

Yet the film shows us that Precious is not that at all. Beneath the anger and silence is an intelligent girl as full of hopes and ambitions as anyone her age—if only she can find a way to escape the squalor around her.

“I think a number of us have looked at young women like Precious and, if we saw them at all, didn't assume a rich, thoughtful,

intellectual inner life,” says Geoffrey Fletcher, who wrote the screenplay. “But the book is so much about the idea of invisibility and after one reads it, or sees the film I hope, it will be very difficult for young women like Precious to remain invisible or easily dismissed.”

Adapted by Fletcher (his first feature film) and produced and directed by Lee Daniels, *Precious* was a triumph at Sundance, taking the Audience Award and the Grand Jury Prize, as well as a Special Jury Prize for actress Mo'Nique.

That Sapphire's novel made it to the screen at all is remarkable. Its scenes of physical, verbal and sexual abuse would provoke an NC-17 rating if they were rendered verbatim, and its first-person narrative style, written in the dialect of its protagonist, would seem to make it a fiendishly difficult story to adapt.

Yet, for reasons not even Fletcher fully understands, the screenplay seemed to just come

to him. “I might have a more difficult time with a so-called simpler book,” he says. “This one spoke to me in every way.”

Troubled Childhood

The novel *Push* starts in 1987. The book tells Precious' story from the inside; the text is written in her own Harlem-born dialect, reflecting exactly how she speaks, and while she is from the start an active, perceptive narrator, she quickly reveals a harrowing background she has kept secret from everyone.

Precious has been raped repeatedly by her father as long as she can remember, he is the father of her daughter, who has “Down sinder” (Down syndrome), and the new child she's carrying. Her mother Mary is verbally and physically abusive. Precious is illiterate, but keeps it a secret and has been passed through the school system without anyone managing to notice.

Yet on the inside, Precious dreams of escape

to a saner, more stable life, even if she can't quite picture one. She idolizes Louis Farrakhan as an ideal man because he demands discipline and accountability. She hates white people while still having a crush on her white math teacher and dreams of living with him in “Weschesser, wherever that is.” Her fantasies, like those of any young girls in the 1980s, weave in the likes of Madonna and Tom Cruise—though in those fantasies, she imagines her beautiful self as light-skinned.

She is expelled from school for being pregnant again. But since her math teacher says she's one of his better students, the principal recommends she attend an alternative school, Each One/Teach One. There she finds herself in a small class of only girls, each troubled in her own way. Her beautiful new teacher, Ms. Rain, insists all her students write daily in a journal, whether they think they can write or not.

In the months that follow, Precious blossoms



Lenny Kravitz as Nurse John and Gabourey Sidibe as Precious



Sidibe with
Paula Patton
as Ms. Rain

but the horrors in her life do not abate. She bonds with her classmates, experiences real love for the first time, and gains confidence as she escapes her mother's influence. When she brings her newborn son home, though, Mary attacks her and Precious must flee to a shelter, where her baby is nearly stolen. Ms. Rain finds her a halfway house to live in, but soon after Mary tells Precious her father is dead of AIDS. Precious discovers she is also HIV positive, though her baby is not.

But through all this, with the help of her teacher and classmates, she finds hope. A final, cathartic social-worker session with Mary reveals to everyone, including Precious, the full horror of Precious' upbringing. Precious cuts Mary off once and for all, rejects the low expectations of her social worker, and moves forward with her life determined to make the most of herself.

Finding a Collaborator

Daniels read the book shortly after it came out. "I thought it was fantastic," he says. "I wasn't sure that I could make it into a film, but I loved it so. I slept with it under my pillow, literally under my pillow. I stalked Sapphire, but she just kept telling me no, flat out, for eight years."

At the time he first approached her, Daniels' resumé was thin, but in the years that followed,

he produced *Monster's Ball*, *The Woodsman*, and several other independent films. He later directed the 2005 film noir *Shadowboxer*. When Sapphire saw *Shadowboxer*, Daniels says, "She really responded to it, and she said okay."

Now he had an option on the book, but he was unsure whether he would direct the movie himself. "I'm a very hands-on producer and I like discovering directors, and most of the directors I've worked with have been first-time directors."

So he went out looking for financing with the writer and director slots still unfilled. "I felt that I should go to African-Americans with money because they would sort of understand the story," he says.

That search for investors led him to Geoffrey Fletcher.

Fletcher, now 38, grew up in Waterford, Connecticut, the youngest of three sons. "Filmmaking was the love of my life from such an early age," Fletcher says. "I was playing with still cameras as a 12-year-old, motion-picture cameras as a 14-year-old. I was probably in love with it before all of that, but I only got a chance to express it more by getting my hands on the cameras."

Fletcher's background had none of the deprivation of Precious' life. He attended Waterford High for two years, then went on to Choate Rosemary Hall, the private boarding school

that boasts alumni ranging from actor Michael Douglas to John F. Kennedy. He followed in his brothers' footsteps by going to Harvard, where he studied psychology, then went on to NYU Film School.

"After film school, I was trying to get into the industry," he says. "I knew that writing was hopefully a way to get in and hopefully a way stay in. I wrote thousands of pages with no promise of anything, just developing my craft and growing as a storyteller.

"One of my goals was to be able to create a pile of pages that spoke for itself without any need for me to explain it or direct it. I'd always admired screenwriters so much. My M.F.A. is in directing, but it meant a lot to me to be considered a writer." While writing, he also directed short films.

Fletcher's oldest brother, in the meantime, had become wealthy as a money manager. Daniels sought him out in 2006 as a potential backer for *Push*.

The younger Fletcher was introduced as an aspiring filmmaker, and he asked Daniels to look at a short he'd made, *Magic Markers*. "I was just blown away by it," says Daniels, "very similarly to the way I was blown away by Marc Forster's piece, *Everything Put Together*." Forster, too, it should be noted, was an NYU Film School alum with no feature credits when Daniels put him on *Monster's Ball*.

Daniels asked Fletcher for a writing sample and was just as impressed. He was impressed with Fletcher, too. So Daniels asked Fletcher if he knew of *Push*.

"I am both embarrassed and grateful that I hadn't heard of the novel," says Fletcher. "I'm embarrassed because it's such a revered and important piece of work, grateful because if I'd read it before, I might have been intimidated and unable to look at it with a fresh eye."

Fletcher says he was hooked from the second of the book's two epigraphs, from the Talmud: "Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers 'Grow, grow.'" Fletcher was taken enough with that line to put it at the beginning of the script, though a different quote opens the movie.

Though Fletcher's background was about as different from Precious' as could be—a prosperous, loving, supportive, two-parent family that valued education—he clicked with the material.

"From a distance or a glance, [the material] might look like a very exotic, specific set of circumstances, but it's utterly universal. I think [the story speaks to] anyone who has ever felt marginalized, discounted, dismissed, underestimated, and has such a will and a determination and a goodness about them. I think most people have experienced one or a number of those feelings."

One connection Fletcher felt with Precious was the growth that came from her journaling. "I'd put myself through so much in terms of the writing, I think that was one of the reasons why the book made so much sense to me."

Fantasy Cruise

His adaptation work started, he says, on that very first read of the book. "I did a lot of notes, a lot of preparation on the first read. By the time I get through a book, a lot of the thinking and a lot of the groundwork is typically done."

From the beginning, he says, "I saw how, early on, a timeline should be shifted; new characters added and, in some cases, expanded." He also saw the fantasy sequences that help illuminate Precious' thoughts, including one moment when she sees herself in the mirror as a petite blonde.

That reflection showed a theme Fletcher wanted to explore through Precious' journey: What is beauty? "Precious reaches a place that I found so moving," he says, "where she discovers the beautiful girl inside her is a black girl, too."

Her self-acceptance was certainly a theme in the book, but just one of several. "In order to make that moment more resonant and give it its due," he says, "it needed to be set up."

One part of that set-up was dream/fantasy sequences in which Precious sees herself as a glamorous star on a red carpet, or a radiant member of a church choir, or even courted by Tom Cruise.

Cruise, in fact, appears by name several times through the script, and both Daniels and Fletcher did hope he'd be in it. "I kept bringing him back and back and back," says Daniels, "and I felt every time she had a fantasy, he had to be a part of the fantasy." The dream sequences created for him remain in the film, though with a less-famous face in his place.

Setting up Precious' journey to self-worth also meant that Louis Farrakhan, whose poster had a place of honor on Precious' wall in the book, was supplanted by Cyndi Lauper.

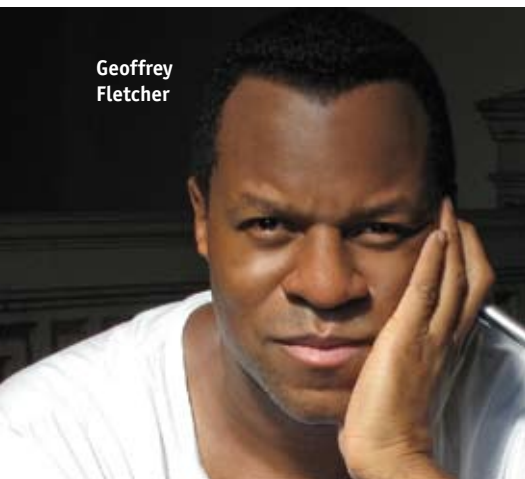
"In the film, I think you have limited wall space—literally, in this case," says Fletcher, "To me, her feeling for Farrakhan was very important, but also important was her feeling of self-worth. And I took the opportunity to use that wall to set up, to put in motion this idea, to signify where she is early on, to contrast where she ultimately lands."

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Geoffrey Fletcher



In the book, Precious' inner life is the text but she rarely speaks to others, so it's easy for them to mistake her silence for stupidity.

To bring her inner voice into the movie, Fletcher wrote voiceover for her, though not a lot of it. Much of her growth is shown instead in invented scenes with her classmates and others.

Daniels says, "I felt that the usage of voiceover was sort of cheesy, at a certain point I'd need to see [the character growth]."

In the movie, Ms. Rain takes in Precious for a little while after Mary attacks her, so Precious meets Ms. Rain's wife and sees them together. The scene shows her coping with something she still finds shocking, while in voiceover she says "Together, these homo ladies talk like TV channels I don't watch," though she recognizes the women are very smart.

She also muses "Mama say homos is bad people, but homos not who rape me, homos not who let me sit in school 15 years and learn nuffin', and homos not sell crack to people in Harlem."

Besides Ms. Rain, expanded is the character of a male nurse, John, played by Lenny Kravitz in the film. In the book, Precious thinks back occasionally to a kind, very handsome paramedic she remembers from the birth of her daughter. Fletcher made him a nurse and moved the character forward in time to the birth of her son. He becomes a recurring character and the object of much flirting from Precious' classmates.

Invented entirely from scratch is Ruby, a little girl who lives near Precious. She always

wants to play with Precious, but Precious never has time for her, and even pushes her away once.

We last see Ruby waiting in the same doctor's waiting room as Precious. Precious treats her kindly. "When Precious finally embraces her, she finally embraces herself as worthwhile," says Fletcher.

One of the most difficult challenges, though, was simply translating Precious' words to the screen. Fletcher didn't make any radical adjustments in her dialect, but Daniels notes, "Even for African-Americans, that's a hard dialect to decipher in reading. We had to be careful about her voice. A lot of the early criticism of the film was that people didn't understand her."

A Chance to Breathe

Much of Fletcher's success, it turned out, was cracking the problem of how much of Precious' backstory to put into the movie, and how to portray it.

"If I had written the script," says Daniels, "the movie would never have been made because it would have been the book. I would have been more graphic. But Geoffrey, through his elegance and his eloquence, was able to create a world that was palatable to America and to an audience. He really was able to make it so that we could breathe."

Certainly, elements that might have put off a mainstream audience are gone, particularly Precious' admiration for Farrakhan and her contempt for whites. Some of her more disturbing self-destructive moments also go unmentioned.

As for the sexual content, the movie leaves no doubt that Precious has been raped by her father, but the flashbacks are brief and oblique enough to spare the picture an NC-17 rating.

Daniels eventually decided to direct the movie himself. "I just felt that I come from the complete opposite of where [Fletcher] comes from. I don't come from a wealthy family." While he is quick to compliment Fletcher's work, especially the structure he brought to the story, he says, "There was a disconnect, I thought, so I ended up directing it."

On the set, Daniels felt one of his contributions to the film was "to go in, as would any director, and breathe a bit more of the

ghetto back into it.

"[Fletcher] gave us the template to work with, and then the actors and I went back a little bit, edged it out a little bit, roughed it up a little bit with a little cursing and a little more graphicness."

In some ways, though, the script is more graphic than the film. Some of the most extreme scenes from the book are in the screenplay and were even filmed, but were cut from the picture. Daniels says the Armory scene where Precious spends a night in a shelter was so strong, "I can't even put it in the director's cut."

The only scene in the book where Precious ventures out of her Harlem neighborhood, a journey to an Incest Survivors meeting, was filmed but cut as well.

Fletcher liked the scene because it showed that women from every class and background suffered the same horrors. But on the screen, Daniels says, "I felt we were hitting people over the head, it was becoming almost a movie of the week. We got it. We knew that she'd grown."

One bit of drama came as the film neared release. A science-fiction movie called *Push* was released around the time this movie was shown at Sundance.

As it turned out, Fletcher had a solution already in hand: He'd called the story *Precious*. "I didn't want that title," says Daniels. "I wanted to stay true to the book."

Lionsgate, which picked up the film for distribution, offered a list of alternatives that included *Precious*, and Oprah Winfrey, her name now attached as executive producer, liked it, too. "And so I took her lead on that, which was Geoffrey's original idea anyway."

Looking back on the process, Fletcher likes to cite a quote Oprah shared with him: "Luck is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity." He had done the preparation with his studies of psychology and his years of filmmaking, film school, and writing. When opportunity arrived in the form of *Push* and Lee Daniels, Fletcher was ready.

"We all have so much more in common than we want to believe," he says, "on so many levels, psychological levels. Precious is experiencing truths we all experience. Hers may seem a lot more dramatic and spectacular, but the core is so universal and truthful." 🦋