

■ **Ava DuVernay:** NO MORE  
COMPLAINING

Ava DuVernay is a new breed of filmmaker. Writer, director, producer and distributor of her indie film *Middle of Nowhere*, DuVernay represents the kind of do-it-all driving force that is required to tell the stories that fall outside the big-budget Hollywood mainstream. That is not a measure of the quality of her film, however. *Middle of Nowhere*, the story of a young woman struggling to move forward in her life as her husband languishes in prison, has a top-notch cast that includes Emayatzy Corinealdi, Lorraine Toussaint, Omari Hardwick and David Oyelowo. And it won her the best director award at Sundance 2012.

DuVernay spoke to Sharon Waxman at TheWrap's screening series.

**SHARON WAXMAN** I understand you turned down some distribution offers for the film, and you met with at least one studio executive who was surprised you didn't pitch her the project.

**AVA DUVERNAY** I just didn't feel like I had to pitch her. There's no need for me to go through that ritual. I really just don't fit into their business model. I think black filmmakers or any non-dominant filmmaker—LGBT, Hispanic—need to understand that it's a business.

Even if you're a white woman or even a white man who is looking to tell a story that's not on-the-nose in the dominant culture, it's going to be a tough road. The question is: Are we going to complain about that? I think complaining is valid, but a couple decades of it is probably enough. We might want to progress a little and actually do something.

**How did you learn the business side of the industry?**

I started a distribution company last year, because as I was starting to become a full-time filmmaker I knew that there wasn't a distributor who was interested in the interior lives of black women. I had a marketing and publicity background and knew that was about 80 percent of distribution, and the rest was learning how to book theaters. So I taught myself how to book and started booking films. My film *I Will Follow* was the first. It was sort of the guinea pig. And now we've distributed four films. This was the fourth, and on this one I wanted a little more firepower in terms of the budget, so we partnered with Participant, and we put the film out.

**Why did you choose to tell a story about a woman**



DuVernay, a former publicist, poses prior to the TheWrap's Screening Series panel in November

**in limbo?**

I wanted to make a love story in the inner city. I grew up in Compton, so I knew of many mothers, daughters, sisters who were touched by incarceration. And I always kind of thought that they were the lesser of us, that they were weaker women than I. I really didn't uncover that prejudice that I had until I started working with these women. I interviewed about 150 women while writing the script just to make sure I had the characteristics down.

Several of this year's films talk about the black experience—*Middle of Nowhere*, *Lincoln*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Django Unchained*—but yours is the only one told by an African-American.

You're dealing with these images of African American life, and there are four films that all come from these really different perspectives. They are all valid, but they are all different. The question for me as a black woman filmmaker is whether my take on it is as valid as some of these white men and their narratives. And what I've found is that it's not as easily accepted for whatever reason. There's some kind of resistance that I've felt along the way to even get people to watch our screening or come to our screenings. And so I think that's part of the conversation. What kind of image of African-Americans is acceptable? And from whom are they acceptable? It's part of the discussion, but I think we're lucky to have four films this year that allow us to explore that.