



Beah: A Black Woman Speaks

A film by LisaGay Hamilton

*Produced by Neda Armian, Jonathan Demme,
LisaGay Hamilton, and Joe Viola*



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Beah: A Black Woman Speaks

Synopsis

Beah: A Black Woman Speaks the directorial debut of actress LisaGay Hamilton, celebrates the life of legendary African American actress, poet and political activist Beah Richards, best known for her Oscar-nominated role in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* While Richards struggled to overcome racial stereotypes throughout her long career onstage and onscreen in Hollywood and New York, she also had an influential role in the fight for Civil Rights, working alongside the likes of Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois and Louise Patterson.

After performing with Richards in Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*, Hamilton was compelled to get Beah's inspiring story on film, and began the project with Demme as co-producer. A series of intimate interviews captures Richards' feisty passion and enduring elegance, and are woven together with a cache of archival material of her work as an actress and activist, including riveting performances of some of her most famous poems. Enlightening and moving, the film is a fitting tribute to Richard's life of integrity, leadership and service to the two cultures she loved so deeply—the arts and the African American community.



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Beah: A Black Woman Speaks

Credits

90 minutes, Color, Video, Documentary

Written and Directed by

LisaGay Hamilton

Producers

Neda Armian
Jonathan Demme
LisaGay Hamilton
Joe Viola

Editor

Kate Amend, A.C.E.

Director of Photography

Sovonto Green

Music Composed by

Bernice Johnson Reagon
Toshi Reagon
and Geri Allen

Production Coordinator

Kay Lyn Byrne

Assistant Editor

Monique Zavistovski

Digital Compositing

Bryan Douglas Wilhite
Songhay System

Sound/On Line Editor

Bill Bryn Russell

Re-Recording Mixer

Robert Fernandez

Music Editor

John M. Davis

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Festivals and Awards

Peabody Award Winner

Miami International Film Festival, *Audience Award*

AFI Film Festival, *Grand Jury Prize*

Austin Film Festival Documentary Series, *Audience Award, Best Documentary Feature*

San Francisco Black Film Festival, *3rd Place*

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)

IDA International Documentary Showcase

Pan African Film Festival

Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano, Havana

Aaron Davis Hall Harlem Film Festival

Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO)



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Long Synopsis

In 1999, actress LisaGay Hamilton sat down with activist, poet and fellow actress Beah Richards for the first in a series of frank, thought-provoking conversations. Over the next year, Richards shared the insights and truths she had gained during her celebrated, sometimes controversial career. The exclusive documentary ***Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*** presents the hard-earned wisdom of this remarkable artist and activist, and reveals the deep and tender relationship that developed between the two women.

Having worked with Beah Richards on the feature film *Beloved*, Hamilton was mesmerized by the older woman's talent and inspired by her wisdom. Two years after completion of *Beloved*, Richards became gravely ill. Hamilton felt inclined to visit her, and the relationship that ensued formed the basis for this remarkable documentary.

Hamilton shared the experience of her visit with friend and mentor Jonathan Demme, who had directed both women in *Beloved*. Within days of expressing her desire to capture Richards on film, Hamilton received a digital camera in the mail, along with a note from Demme that simply read, "Do it." With Demme's unwavering support, Hamilton set out to record her encounters with Richards and an incredible journey began.

Suffering from emphysema and breathing with the aid of an oxygen concentrator, the 80-year-old freely shared her life lessons during 70 hours of interviews. Sitting Buddha-style on her bed, Richards revealed the tapestry of her life, beginning with the solid foundation laid for her by loving parents in the segregated south.

Her search to be an actress led her from Vicksburg, Mississippi to California and New York—and ultimately back home again. In the process, she fought for Civil Rights alongside the likes of Paul Robeson and W.E.B. DuBois. Richards' poetry brought her close to black activists and Communist Party leaders William and Louise Patterson, which in turn spurred the FBI to keep a file on her from 1951 to 1972. This volatile mixture of poetry and politics helped Richards discover her true purpose. As she tells Hamilton, "It is not about you living as an actor. It is about you living as a human being."

Beah: A Black Woman Speaks includes historical footage of Richards performing some of her most famous works, including the poem "A Black Woman Speaks of White Womanhood, White Supremacy and Peace"; "Paul Robeson Speaks for Me," an emotionally charged poem she wrote in high school; and "What Then Is Black...", a poem that redefines the word "black."

(Continued on next page)



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Richards said Mississippi left her a realist in a racist society. Confident in her African beauty, she knew the battle to confront the American or Hollywood ideal would unfortunately be long and hard. Throughout her career, Richards endured being cast primarily as maids and old women. Her first paying job as an actor came off-Broadway at age 36, when she received glorious reviews as Sister Margaret in James Baldwin's *Amen Corner* on Broadway.

Richards' career ultimately spanned more than 50 years in film, on TV and onstage which included a supporting actress Oscar nomination for playing Sidney Poitier's mother in 1967's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* Richards emotionally recalls how this joyful moment was overshadowed by the devastating assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose funeral caused a delay in the awards ceremony.

Fellow actors Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Whitman Mayo and Frank Silvera recall Richards' dignity and innate ability to transcend the material she was offered. She spent a lifetime sharing the gift of acting with others; students describe her unique teaching techniques and devotion to her craft. Richards explains her mission by noting, "When a black actor has the opportunity-I don't care what the role is-he has the chance to capture the conscience of the audience."

Beah: A Black Woman Speaks reveals how Hamilton initiated Richards' last role, on the TV show *The Practice*. Shortly after this performance, Richards, no longer able to care for herself independently, left her Los Angeles home of 25 years, and returned to Mississippi. Hamilton was there with her camera to capture the heartbreaking occasion.

Richards' work on *The Practice* earned her a third Emmy Award, which Hamilton delightedly accepted on Richards' behalf in her absence. The teacher and the admiring student had one final meeting in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where Hamilton gave her the Emmy. Beah Richards died ten days later, on September 14, 2000. At the close of the documentary, Hamilton performs one last act at the request of her mentor, exemplifying Richards's commitment to the struggle for freedom into eternity.

"When a role model of Beah's magnitude finally gets her story told, the inspirational potential is a cause for celebration." —Jonathan Demme



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Biographies



LisaGay Hamilton – Director/Producer

A graduate of the Tisch School of the Arts and the Julliard School of Drama, Hamilton has extensive theatre, film and television credits. For the New York Shakespeare Festival, she played Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, opposite Kevin Kline and Andre Braugher and Lady Hotspur in *Henry IV* Parts I & II. She was also an original cast member in the Broadway Company of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*.

Hamilton earned the Ovation nomination for best actress for her work in Athol Fugard's play *Valley Song*, at the Mark Taper Theatre in Los Angeles. For this performance she earned an Obie Award, the Clarence Derwent Award and a Drama Desk nomination.

Hamilton's film credits include; *The Truth About Charlie* and *Beloved* for director Jonathan Demme, Clint Eastwood's *True Crime*, the independent films; *Palookaville*, *Drunks*, Showtime's *A House Divided*, opposite Sam Waterston and as Ophelia in director Campbell Scott's independent film version of *Hamlet*.

She starred for seven years on the Emmy Award winning, David Kelley drama, *The Practice*. Ms. Hamilton made her prime-time directorial debut this year on *The Practice*, and *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* marks her documentary directorial debut.

Kate Amend, A.C.E. – Editor

Kate Amend is the editor of the 2001 Academy Award winning documentary feature, *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of Kindertransport*, and the Oscar-nominated documentary short *On Tiptoe: Gentle Steps to Freedom*. Amend also received the 2001 American Cinema Editors' Eddie award for *Into the Arms of Strangers*.

Her work has appeared in film festivals throughout the world as well as on PBS, NBC, HBO, VH1, Lifetime, History and Sundance Channels. Recent credits include *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and HBO), *Bataan Rescue* (PBS' American Experience), *The Girl Next Door* (Slamdance '99), *Free a Man to Fight* (History Channel), *The Long Way Home* (1998 Oscar Winner, Best Documentary Feature), and *Tobacco Blues* (P.O.V 1998).

In addition to her film work, Amend worked as an administrator and historian for Judy Chicago's monumental art exhibit *The Dinner Party*. She has produced several videos about Chicago's art including *From Darkness Into Light: Creating the Holocaust Project*. She recently edited the dramatic features *Out of Line* and *A Man is Mostly Water*.



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Beah: A Black Woman Speaks

Biographies (Con't)

Jonathan Demme - Producer

Jonathan Demme has 17 feature films to his credit. They include *The Truth About Charlie*, *Beloved*, *Silence of the Lambs*, for which he won an Academy Award, *Philadelphia*, *Married to the Mob*, *Something Wild*, *Swimming to Cambodia*, and *Melvin and Howard*, for which he was named Best Director by the New York Film Critics. Additional producing credits include *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *Household Saints*, *That Thing You Do!*, and *Ulee's Gold*. He is currently in pre-production on *The Manchurian Candidate* for Paramount Pictures.

A long-time advocate of Human Rights, Demme has produced and directed a number of documentaries, about the continuing struggle for democracy in Haiti. These films include the acclaimed *Haiti: Dreams of Democracy*, *Tonbe Leve* (Fall Down, Get Up), *Haiti: Killing the Dream*, and *Courage and Pain*. Demme also directed *Cousin Bobby*, a documentary tracing the life and activism of his cousin the Reverend Robert Castle, who is involved in the fight for human justice in Harlem.

He produced *Mandela*, the Academy Award-nominated biography of South African President Nelson Mandela; *One Foot on the Banana Peel, the Other Foot in the Grave*, a depiction of the courage and humor of people living with AIDS; and *Into the Rope!* a portrait of the Nyack Jumpers, a Rockland County, NY based Double-Dutch jump rope team. In addition to producing *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, Jonathan Demme is completing a documentary on the Haitian radio journalist and democracy activist Jean Dominique, who was assassinated in April 2000 on the steps of his Port au Prince radio station.

Joe Viola – Producer

In addition to work on *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*, Joe Viola has written feature films for Universal (*It's Magic*) and Sony (*Uncle Wiggily*). Co-written (with Jonathan Demme), and directed two feature films for Roger Corman's New World Pictures, was a writer on *Subway Stories* for HBO and a writer/producer on various drama series for CBS, NBC, and ABC.

Neda Armian – Producer

Neda Armian is a New York-based film producer with a varied roster of projects from feature films to documentaries. She most recently completed work as a producer on the feature *The Truth About Charlie*, shot on location in Paris by Academy Award-winner Jonathan Demme and starring Mark Wahlberg. Previously, she worked as a production associate on the feature film *Beloved*, starring Oprah Winfrey, the documentary *The Utmost*, and the concert film *Storefront Hitchcock*.. Also in the realm of music, she produced a Bruce Springsteen video.

Armian's full credits total eleven feature films, including *ADAPTATION*, directed by Spike Jonze; *That Thing You Do!*, directed by Tom Hanks; *Devil in a Blue Dress*, directed by Carl Franklin; and *Philadelphia*; as well as numerous documentaries and music videos.

While running Jonathan Demme's production company Clinica Estetico, Armian shepherded a wide slate of projects – working with such writers as Anne Rapp, Beth Henley, and Ron Nyswaner, and overseeing the company's myriad production and distribution endeavors, such as the recent American release of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Wide Blue Road*.



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Director's Notes

I think there are those rare moments in one's life that, if you are *ready* to hear and see then, the connection can be made with that unique force or energy that is there to guide you. I was ready for Beah! In fact I was in search of her my whole life.

My initial visits with Beah were selfish on my part. I was truly in need of healing, of guidance and of connection. I went to her on the whim that perhaps the energy I felt from her on our encounter on the film *Beloved*, some years ago, was true. After the first visit I left her house vibrating. My body and mind knew that Beah possessed ancient wisdom that would change my life forever. And then Beah began calling me, asking me to come over for visits!

After each visit I kept saying to myself that I needed to bring a tape recorder and yet I never did. I wanted to preserve all that she said to me. In passing I had mentioned to Jonathan Demme that we should do something on Beah. I told him of our friendship and of my fear that she would die before there was a record of her history.

Without skipping a beat, Jonathan paved the way for Beah and I to begin collaborating on a documentary. Beah and Jonathan took a leap of faith in my ability to direct. I blindly and enthusiastically began on a journey that I am forever grateful for and changed by.

After Beah's death I happened upon the definition of an African Teacher. Here are some of those principals:

1. *A belief that spirituality is at the center of our being.*
2. *The belief that each child is a "Living Sun", a Divine gift of the creator.*
3. *African teachers place a premium on bringing their students into a knowledge of themselves.*
4. *An African Teacher is a parent, friend, guide, coach, healer, counselor, model, storyteller, entertainer, artist, architect, builder, minister, advocate to and for students.*

Beah was my African Teacher and most importantly she was *our Jegnas* – *our great master*. It became my commitment to Beah and to my community that Beah be seen and heard by all for eternity.



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THE REPORTER

news

AFI jury taps 'Old, New'

By Gregg Kilday

Natasha Arthy's "Old, New, Borrowed and Blue," a romantic comedy from Denmark about a young woman whose life takes an unexpected turn on the eve of her wedding, was awarded the grand jury prize in the International Feature Competition at AFI Fest 2003's Kodak Connect closing reception held Friday night at Cinespace in Hollywood.

Actress turned director LisaGay Hamilton took home the grand jury prize in the International Documentary Competition for her film, "Beah: A Black Woman Speaks," a portrait of the actress, poet and activist Beah Richards.

In the International Shorts

Competition, the grand jury prize was awarded to "Deep Silence" (Silencio Profundo), directed by Gustavo Loza, and the honorable mention award went to "American Made," directed by Sharat Raju.

The jury for the feature competition was comprised of journalist Robert Abele and filmmakers Tony Bui and Karen Kusama; for the documentary competition, actor Jeremy Sisto, filmmaker Lianne Skyler and magazine editor Tom White; and for the international shorts competition, actor Chris Klein, film producer Alison Dickey and film producer Gill Holland.

The festival concluded Sunday with a screening of the Lions Gate Film "Monster," starring Charlize Theron. ■



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VARIETY

Sun., Nov. 16, 2003

'Blue' & 'Beah' draw top kudos at AFI fest

By DAVID S. COHEN

Danish laffer "Se Til Venstre, Der Er En Svensker" (Old, New, Borrowed and Blue) took the Grand Jury Prize in the international feature competition as AFI Fest 2003 announced its winners Friday night.

The Dogma film, which follows a bride-to-be in the days before her wedding, was helmed by Natasha Arthy.

Top docu honors went to "Beah: A Black Woman Speaks." Pic, which looks at the life of African-American poet, social activist and thesp Beah Richards, a 1968 Oscar nominee for "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," marks the directorial bow of thesp Lisa Gay Hamilton ("The Practice").

Gustavo Loza's "Deep Silence" nabbed the prize in the short film competish. Mexican pic tells of two children who disappear from Havana and what happens when only one returns — and he chooses to remain silent. Honorable mention went to "American Made," directed by Sharat Raju.

Fest, which unspooled at the ArcLight Cinema in Hollywood, featured 134 films from 24 countries. Among the 26 world preems were bows for "Calendar Girls," "House of Sand and Fog" and "The Statement." Sunday night's closing night premiere was Patty Jenkins' "Monster," starring Charlize Theron as serial killer Aileen Wournos.

Fest's tribute and retrospective saluted thesp Omar Sharif.



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On the evening of August 28, 2003, the MTV Video Music Awards were momentarily transformed into an impromptu player's ball. An ensemble of today's chart-topping hip-hop artists — we won't name names here 'cause y'all know who you are — blessed screaming fans with a shameful performance, complete with men dressed as pimps accompanied by a group of "dancers," scantily-clad, of course. Immediately following the performance, Chris Rock, who acted as master of ceremonies, noted, sincerely, over deafening applause, "Today is the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. Isn't it nice to see that his dream has finally come true?" While Rock gets major points for being funny as hell, he should also be credited with dropping some science on us when we least expect it. But as the festivities came to a close and the evening's winners happily toted their "moon man" statuettes, sadly, the truth that Rock spoke had fallen on deaf ears. Damn.

But wait... let's rewind a bit to a time when race pride was a given, not an option. The year was 1968 and the late Ms. Beah Richards was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). While there's no doubt that Ms. Richards was honored to be nominated, she was also battling the aftertaste of a bitter reality. In short, the joy of her professional achievement was overshadowed by a debilitating blow — the assassination of Dr. King. Although the Academy Awards were originally scheduled to take place on April 8, 1968, the country would instead mourn the loss of a treasured, fallen leader. Ms. Richards did not take home the Oscar when the ceremony took place on April 10th, but it didn't matter much as she was preoccupied anyway. "It was a terrible time," she remembers in the documentary film, *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*. "I was kind of unconscious during the whole [ceremony]. It was like I wasn't even there. I didn't know what anything meant."

The basic laws of human nature make obvious the suggestion that as we lay, complacent, under the shade of the tree, the effort expended by our ancestors in planting the seeds has been squandered. But as Ms. Richards so eloquently, passionately, states, "You have to believe...and you must not betray your people — you must fight for them [as] they fought for you. You ain't gonna be a millionaire, but you can win." Born in 1920, Ms. Richards, a self-proclaimed "realist in a racist society," was reared in the bowels of the south — Vicksburg, Mississippi, more specifically — and later traveled to San Diego, creative artistry, drive, and a mere \$10 in tow. The rest of her life story, told through conversation, spoken word, photos, and archived footage, is humbling, to say the very least. Her heartfelt storytelling is steeped in spiritu-

ality, pride, tradition, and an unparalleled love of self and her people. You will laugh, cry, think, and in the case of this writer, ache for just one more sitting with your grandmother. Simply stated, this documentary work is not only an important addition to the annals of Black history, but also a very necessary educational tool for the masses.

All praises are due to first-time director, LisaGay Hamilton, who made a life-altering phone call to Beah Richards in 1999. After working alongside Ms. Richards on *Beloved*, she reached out to her elder co-star upon hearing the news that she had taken ill. Fatefully, Hamilton took a leap of faith and tried her hand at directing her first film — a documentary, no less. Although she was unfamiliar with the intricacies of life behind the camera, director Jonathan Demme (*Beloved*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Philadelphia*) urged her to document her visits with the legendary actress, poet, dancer, playwright, and political activist.

While Hamilton, a Juilliard graduate, is best known for her six-season stint as attorney Rebecca Washington on "The Practice," she began her creative journey in theater. After tackling the Broadway stage, she's effortlessly walked the tightrope between the large and small screens. Along with *Beloved*, her credits include *Jackie Brown*, *True Crime*, and *Sum of All Fears*, as well as "Law & Order" and "Homicide: Life on the Street."

Venice had the opportunity to sit with LisaGay Hamilton on an overcast afternoon to discuss the essence of Ms. Richards, the importance of knowing (and honoring) one's history, as well as her newfound joy as a director.

Venice: First, I have to thank you for bringing forth this work because it is so very necessary. What inspired you to direct this film?

LisaGay Hamilton: Beah! As the film begins, I tell the story of meeting her on the set of *Beloved*. Although I shared half of my scenes with her, we spent little time together off-screen. Looking back, I suppose I was intimidated and star struck because so many people spoke of this force, this power, that she encompassed.

When I met up with Beah again, she was definitely at a crossroads in her life as she was coming to terms with illness and death, which seemed to be coming sooner than she wished. Separate from the issues of her health, I think Beah was an African teacher, one who believed in the divinity of children and teaching her students to know about themselves. And that is what this film is about — the issue of identity.

My visits with Beah were from the teacher-to-student perspective and a friendship grew between us as a result — she was my inspiration and also my collaborator. She wanted to leave some words behind to help teach the Black community, in particu-

lar, and also, humanity. I felt it tragic that her wisdom and her presence would go unseen, unheard, and unpreserved.

Jonathan Demme was in town some time ago and asked me what I was interested in doing. Unfortunately, I wasn't as prepared for that question as I should have been. [laughs] But I'd spoken with him in depth about my visits with Beah and how amazing they were. I felt as though we needed to do something, but I hadn't yet identified what that "something" was. So, literally, the next day, he called Beah and asked if she was interested in doing a documentary. Then he called me and asked me if I was ready and I said, "OK." He sent me two cameras and the rest is history.

What was your experience of working with Jonathan on his side of the camera?

It was extraordinary. I found it liberating and inspiring. I do think things happen for a reason and I believe that Beah, in her wisdom and ability to see ahead, saw that I, like all individuals, must explore all aspects of who I am and not to be afraid, hesitate, or procrastinate. If you think of Beah Richards, you might not necessarily think of LisaGay Hamilton directing, but Beah did... as did Jonathan.

This film gave me the opportunity to explore the power of storytelling and the importance of documentary [as it relates to] preserving our culture. Every time I sat behind the camera, I thought about all of the people who should be recording their grandmothers, grandfathers, and all of the greats who are slowly getting older and passing — we need to have their information handy. As a community, I think that we are becoming an endangered species and as Beah's generation leaves us, and even people in their 60s, we're going to be up the creek.

I think that many of the young artists out there are lacking self-awareness and identity, which is reflected in their words, music, and acting. Beah's point was that if you know who you are, you wouldn't even pretend to say the words that you are saying. If you know who you are, it would kill your spirit to self-destruct in that way. The spirit is very powerful, yet very, very simple. It's not like Beah was recreating the wheel or formulating a new philosophy — it's as simple as bread & butter. Every time I sat with her, I just thought about how much we need this. Being behind the camera just added to the experience of enriching who I am.

I want to direct now. If it had not been for Beah, I don't think I would have continued to lobby for an opportunity to direct on "The Practice." I had the courage, after being fired, to call back to ask David Kelley if I could direct and he said yes. That was my African teacher saying, "Hey, go for it...and keep going!"

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You mentioned that you were intimidated by Ms. Richards. How did you summon the courage to reach out to her and also, begin the filming process?

I was going through a very hard time in my life and I happen to love older black women – I think I have a “grandmother fetish.” [laughs] Someone told me that Beah lived down the street from me, but it was my mother who actually suggested that I give her a call. So, I called and after we met for the first time, I swear to you, I was vibrating. Then she started to call me and she’d say, “Just checking up on ya, wondering where you are.”

Then it dawned on me that she was asking for me. I had no right to say no, nor did I want to say no and I knew that it would behoove me to selfishly absorb as much from her as I possibly could. She knew I was ready and that I would keep my promise.

I have to admit that there were many times when I sat behind the camera and had no

was demeaning or derogatory. Hypothetically speaking, she could have died a richer woman if she had in fact taken roles that were untruthful portrayals. There’s nothing wrong with playing a prostitute, a pimp, a drug addict, or even mammy, but what’s the truthfulness of the story? In the [narrow] box of Hollywood and the limited language that a given text provides, be it television, film, or theater, Beah always, always found the truth in a given character no matter the words she spoke. She could take language that perhaps was meant to tell a lie or denigrate and still have the capacity to create a character that you were in awe of, even if she wore a maid’s uniform. That is the sign of a true craftsman.

I cried during the scene when she sold her Los Angeles home to return to her hometown in Mississippi. Were there any points in the filming that you got teary?

Yes, the hankies came out [when she sold

approached me and spoken of a change that occurred in them after seeing the film. Because Beah speaks so truthfully, [her message] crosses culture, gender, and religious boundaries. There is a feeling close to freedom [that you experience] when someone speaks to you from their heart without wanting anything in return other than that you operate in a truthful manner. I hope her truth is received.

Although you and Ms. Richards were separated by generation, you shared the experience of trying to find your place in Hollywood as an actress, a Black actress. How has your interaction with her affected your outlook on life and also, your craft?

Beah told me to say “thank you” to adversity because it gives you another perspective and makes you stronger. I see my journey as being very long and arduous, yet glorious. I

Beah told me to say “Thank you” to adversity because it gives you another perspective and makes you stronger.

idea what she was talking about. But as I began to look at the footage over and over and over again in post (production), that which I did not understand, at all, became so basically clear to me. It took some time for the information to settle, but now I understand everything, completely.

Beah and I shared similar politics and heroes. She was fortunate enough to have been with Paul Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois, and all of the greats who are my heroes. The fact that she had been in their presence made her even greater to me.

Ms. Richards said that she’d played everyone’s mother, but oddly, she was also relegated to portraying a maid far too many times. How do you think she was able to maintain her humility in the face of such racism and artistic disrespect?

I think it was because she came from an extraordinary foundation. She was born into poverty in 1920, in Mississippi, which we know was the hell of the south, if not still. We’re talking about pre-Jim Crow. A year before Beah’s death (in 2000), a young man was lynched and tarred right around the corner from where she lived.

Her father was a minister who reveled in language and words. As she suggested, he truly remembered our history. Here was a preacher calling himself Black – not Colored, not Negro, certainly not nigger, but Black. So, I think Beah was so unique because her foundation was so strong. That’s a moral that I would love to instill in our community – if you start at your foundation, racism won’t stop you. As painful as racism is, you will know that it is not the truth [and as a result], you’ll be stronger and want to fight harder.

Because of her foundation, Beah could not betray her people by portraying a role that

the house]. Aside from the filmmaking aspect, there are moments in your life that are redefining. Having been an intimate part of packing up her house of 25 years and watching her [exhibit] the strength to get up, walk through the door, get in the car, and turn the page like that [snaps her fingers] was phenomenal to me. It’s quite insublime in the film, but [at a certain point] she says, “OK, let’s get this started.” That’s when the wheelchair turns and she heads toward the car.

She also said that life is about change to change and you have to go with the changes. Beah really, truly lived in the moment, but then again the moment is also infinity, the past, present, and the future. Her connection to the ancestors, the spirits, herself and the community was with her 24/7.

Life is an evolutionary process of letting go and moving forward and I hope that as I mature, I will have the courage to endure the changes and also, the painful moments and know that all of it is toward the Eastern, African idea of perfection.

Can you describe how you felt when, per Ms. Richards’ wishes, you sprinkled her ashes across the Confederate cemetery?

It was sad, but also glorious at the same time. I openly wonder if I’ll have to hide when we show the film in Vicksburg. [laughs] The Klan is still very much alive.

What would you like viewers to walk away with after seeing the film?

Well, I asked that question of Beah and she said, “I have no idea, but if they can hear it and can use it, then it’s done what it’s supposed to.”

Many Asian-Americans, Euro-Americans, Africans, and also African-Americans have

am a mother now, so along with parenting, I’m trying to figure out how to survive as a Black human being in this country while being an individual and an artist. I want to participate in a way that enriches, educates, and entertains by making people laugh and think, all in a way that is truthful – that is not an easy journey, nor a profitable one. I do believe that I am connected to the ancestors and that it is my responsibility to teach my son, and all children, by [the example of] how I lead my life. I know that I don’t have the luxury, or the capacity, to sit back.

You’ve worked on stage, television, and film, and now you’re directing – what’s next for you?

That is a very good question. [pauses] No matter what is next, it’s about [my] being proactive. It cannot be about waiting by the phone or waiting for someone to hire me. Whether I want to act or direct, I know that I can’t wait for anyone else to find a project for me. The idea of someone hiring a person who looks like me, shares my politics, and also refuses to assimilate, is slim. Even the issue of my hair being its natural texture can pose a challenge.

Although it may be difficult at times, I, like Beah, accept the limitations and freedoms that that provides me. ▼

Beah: A Black Woman Speaks screens at the AFI Film Festival on November 10th at 7pm at Theatre #13 and November 12th at 4pm at Theatre #10 the ArcLight Hollywood. For information and tickets, visit www.afl.com or www.arclightcinemas.com. The film is slated to air on HBO during February 2004 as the centerpiece of “Hearing Her Voice: Black History/Herstory,” a celebration of the contributions of African-American women.



Beah: A Black Woman Speaks

People

MARCH 1, 2004

Beah: A Black Woman Speaks

HBO (Wed., Feb. 25, 7:30 p.m. ET)

DOCUMENTARY Lisa Gay Hamilton (formerly of *The Practice*) didn't really get to know Beah Richards in 1997 when the two actresses worked on the movie *Beloved*. At the time, Hamilton found her intimidating. But a couple of years later Hamilton heard that Richards was seriously ill with emphysema, so she began regularly visiting the octogenarian, who died in 2000. Out of their friendship came this extraordinary documentary, in which director-interviewer Hamilton helps a failing but still formidable Richards pass on her philosophy of acting as "being" and her memories of a life committed to artistic integrity and racial equality.

Richards can indeed be a bit intimidating when she takes her ancient-sage tone, but her laughter encour-



Often in maternal roles, Richards was Sidney Poitier's mother in *Dinner*.

ages us to come closer and partake of her wisdom. Clips of her work—including an Oscar-nominated performance in 1967's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and an Emmy-winning turn on *The Practice* several months before her death—show Richards's combination of emotional honesty and almost queenly dignity. Hamilton's film captures the subject's inextinguishable spirit. ★ ★ ★ ★



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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2004

The Miami Herald

A many-faceted actress, activist

■ A documentary that captures the fiery spirit of Beah Richards, actress, poet, playwright and civil rights activist, will be shown on HBO tonight.

BY NICOLE HERRINGTON
nherrington@herald.com

Though Beah Richards was an Oscar-nominated and Emmy-winning actress, she might have given her most electric performance in the documentary *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks*.

Actress LisaGay Hamilton's directorial debut peels back the layers of Richards' life, capturing her fiery spirit. Viewers discover that this actress, whose face may look familiar but whose name doesn't ring a bell, was also a poet and a playwright who tried to wake up the conscience of a racist America. She was a black woman whose involvement in civil rights organizations prompted the FBI to open a file on her in 1951.

EARLY ROLES

When she first started acting in the 1950s and '60s, Richards was relegated to two-line roles as maids, mothers and grandmothers.

Despite the mediocrity of the characters, her performances were always fierce and compelling.

"She knew how to be a queen although she may have been wearing maid's garments," says Ossie Davis, an actor and activist who appears in the documentary.

She is perhaps best remembered for her Oscar-nominated performance as Sidney Poitier's soft-spoken mother in 1967's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, a film that her hometown of Vicksburg, Miss., refused to show.

Hamilton's finely crafted film weaves footage of interviews conducted by Hamilton from 1999 to 2000 with old photographs, clips from her films and footage of the actress performing her poetry. The camera captures the final year of Richards' life, her lungs failing from emphysema

SMART BOX

BEAH RICHARDS

- HBO will air LisaGay Hamilton's 90-minute documentary *Beah: A Black Woman Speaks* at 7:30 tonight.
- Beah Richards' other notable performances: *Roots*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *The Great White Hope*, *ER*, *LA Law* and *The Practice*, for which she was awarded an Emmy Award in 2000.
- To learn more about Women Make Movies, a nonprofit media arts organization that promotes and exhibits films about and by women, visit www.wmm.com.

after years of smoking. But it is the animated Richards, not the directing, that is so moving. Her painful, poignant yet often triumphant memories flow almost seamlessly.

Earlier this month, two Miami audiences were so moved that they voted the film Best Documentary at the Miami International Film Festival.

HBO will air it tonight.

POETIC LICENSE

As a teenager, Richards wrote a poem after hearing Paul Robeson refuse to sing before a segregated audience. "With those words, that man lifted me," Richards says triumphantly. When she met him as an adult, she recited the poem.

Another poem, inspired by a lynching trial, brought women to tears at a peace conference in 1951. Her 1975 rendition of *A Black Woman Speaks of White Womanhood, White Supremacy and Peace* on stage is simply breathtaking. The intensity of each word spoken is biting. Her emotional performance of that poem and later when we learn that Richards must sell her home of 25 years because she can no lon-



COURTESY OF WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

FILM EXPLORES HER LIFE: Award-winning actress Beah Richards' involvement in civil rights organizations prompted the FBI to open a file on her in 1951.

ger care for herself are the most painful scenes.

The Practice provided Richards her last role. She died in 2000, shortly after receiving an Emmy Award for that guest performance. Hamilton, who was a star on the show, presented Richards with the Emmy at her niece's home in

Mississippi.

Richards' strength and wisdom were an inspiration, the interviews show.

"The most important thing about Richards is her ability to define for the artists around her what it is, what the work is," actor Bill Cobbs says in the film.



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