

Interview: Stars Dwight Henry, Quvenzhané Wallis on ‘Beasts of the Southern Wild’

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CHICAGO – Wink (Dwight Henry) and Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané “Nazie” Wallis) don’t have a typical father-daughter relationship in Benh Zeitlin’s visionary fantasy, “Beasts of the Southern Wild.” With his body ailing and his hometown underwater, Wink resorts to tough-love parenting skills in order to teach his daughter self-sufficiency. That includes catching her own food while chanting phrases like, “I’m the man!”

The bond between Wink and Hushpuppy forms the heart of Zeitlin’s film, which won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival, including the Grand Jury Prize, and went on to snag the Camera d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Neither Henry nor Wallis had acted in a film prior to “Beasts,” and have been on a whirlwind festival tour ever since, acquiring widespread acclaim for their work. Zeitlin’s tale of an environmental crisis that unleashes prehistoric creatures known as “aurochs,” while threatening to tear Wink and Hushpuppy from their homeland, has been interpreted as a loving tribute to the resilience of New Orleanians in the face of disaster. Hollywood Chicago spoke with Wallis and Henry about making their film debuts, performing emotional scenes onset and the ways in which the film evokes the spirit of New Orleans.

HollywoodChicago.com: What inspired you to make your film debut in this picture?

Dwight Henry: It was something that I actually didn’t apply for. I own a bakery in New Orleans called the Buttermilk Drop Bakery and Café and I used to be located right across the street from where they were holding the auditions. They used to come over, get breakfast and put up fliers in the bakery for anyone that wanted to audition for the film. They asked me to come over and audition for them, and I was never really interested in doing it. But they kept coming over and I guess they saw some things in me that they wanted to use. So one day, I went over and auditioned for the film, never expecting to get it the part. I was surprised when they called me in for another read. During that time span, I had moved my bakery from one location to another location, and they were actually looking for me, but no one could find me.



Quvenzhané Wallis and Dwight Henry star in Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Photo credit: Mary Cybulski

When they finally called up, they asked me about doing the film. They said that Mr. Zeitlin, the director, loved what he’d seen and they offered me the part. I actually couldn’t take it at first because when they asked me to be out of town for three months, it had only been two days since

I reopened the shop. I really couldn't do it. So they gave me more time to work things out, came back and I still wasn't quite ready to move out of town yet. It would've just taken up too much time. But I worked things out with my partner at the restaurant, which enabled me to do the film, and things went great ever since. They saw some things in me that I hadn't seen in myself. I don't have any regrets for doing the film. I'm so glad that I was able to work things out.

Quvenzhané Wallis: I just wanted to give it a try. I wanted to do [the film] as soon as I knew about it, but I didn't think it would be anything special for me. My mom's friend thought I would be good in the movie because she had seen me [act]. So she called up my mom and said that they were holding auditions, and looking for six to nine-year-olds. I was five when I first auditioned. I ended up having a lot of lines. After the movie was done filming, I went back in to do the narration. [pause] They should've just done the narration during the movie.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did you approach the role of Hushpuppy's father?

Henry: When they first told me that they were going to bring me out to meet the girl that was going to play my daughter, they said that she didn't approve of the first two people who were scheduled to play her father. Nazie was five then, so she had to feel comfortable with who she was working with. I had to try and think of a way to capture her imagination. I decided that since I owned a bakery, I was going to bring her two bags of toys and some goodies. So I packed up some cookies, brownies and other goodies. As soon as I saw her, I handed her the bags and saw that big ol' smile on her face. It was easy for me to relate to Nazie because I had a daughter who was seven years old when I shot the film. The things I had to do in the movie were the same things I had to do in real life. It was an easy transition. I'm a nice, personable type of person and I know how to communicate with young girls, so it was easy to work with Nazie. She's such a sweet, intelligent girl.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was it about Dwight that you liked?

Wallis: Just the goodies. [laughs] The buttermilk drops.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was there a favorite scene that you had in the film? I recall the moment where you light a stove with a flame-thrower...

Wallis: That's not real. I couldn't even imagine doing that myself. [pause] I liked the scene where I had to burp.

HollywoodChicago.com: What did the aurochs look like onset?

Wallis: They had pigs onset and they dressed them up and trained them as the aurochs. Before all that, they just used a cardboard box and drew a little picture of them on it.

Henry: They weren't puppets.



Quvenzhané Wallis and Dwight Henry on the set of Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Photo credit: Jess Pinkham

HollywoodChicago.com: Dwight, there's a memorable scene in the film when you're chanting for Hushpuppy to "beast it," by breaking her seafood with her hands. At a time when many Americans rely on pre-made food, do you find the act of cooking empowering?

Henry: Yes. That's not only a theme in the movie, it's a theme of the culture that I was raised in, the culture that we come from in New Orleans. We have a culture down there that is so unique. We have a rich, rich food culture. On the travels that we've been doing, we've been going to many different places. They have wonderful cultures and wonderful food, but there is nothing like the uniqueness of New Orleans. We have a strong resilience under the worst circumstances in the world that we face yearly. There's always the possibility of losing homes and displacing families. Through the worst circumstances in the world, we always recover. We have a certain strength and resilience that is unlike other places. Once you get a taste of New Orleans and Louisiana, you just can't get it out of your mouth. [pause] On our travels, we went to a restaurant and ordered crawfish, and ended up getting a small plate with four crawfish on it. In our culture, we throw sacks of crawfish on the table and break it with our hands. They sent us forks to eat crawfish with and that's just not our culture. The way we did it in the movie is the way we actually do it in real life.

Wallis: Yeah, we all ate that whole thing. That was like a whole dinner.

Henry: Those weren't fake crabs on the table. After we shot that scene, we had a seafood party.

Wallis: I wasn't gonna eat it alone!

HollywoodChicago.com: Was it challenging to perform the film's more emotional scenes, particularly your final scene together onscreen?

Henry: The whole crew was in tears when we shot that scene. It wasn't one of those situations where they put water in our eyes or did certain things to make us cry. That was real emotion. Mr. Zeitlin used to sit down with me for hours and hours and we'd talk about things that happened in my life, from the time I was a child to an adult. We pulled out some difficult times that I had in my life, which was really moving to me. I had lost some loved ones. Anytime I think about finding my dad lying dead on the sofa, it brings out certain emotions that are uncontrollable. We pulled out some of those stories and put them into the scene. It brought up some emotions that I couldn't hold back. Sometimes you try to hold your emotions back, but when you touch on certain subjects, it came to be so natural.

Wallis: It was like a crying party. Everybody who was near the set from Court 13 was crying. No matter what they did, they were all crying, because they were either looking at the camera or they were listening.



Dwight Henry and Quvenzhané Wallis star in Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Photo credit: Jess Pinkham

HollywoodChicago.com: Did it feel like a family atmosphere onset?

Henry: Yes it did. I always say that if I never do another film again, the things that I'll hold dear to my heart are the friends I met at Court 13. It's not like they're a big production company. These fellas grew up together, they went to school together and it's like a family. I became friends with Mr. Zeitlin, the producers, the art department, and so many other people. They are really like a family. I could see that company ten, twenty years from now still being together. It's amazing how people can come together and stay together like that. You get a sense of the camaraderie and the family unity that they have when you're around them. You can't fake that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Nazie, has this experience made you want to act again?

Wallis: Uh huh.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’re the man.

Wallis: [pumps fist] Yes!

‘Beasts of the Southern Wild’ stars Quvenzhané Wallis, Dwight Henry, Levy Easterly, Lowell Landes, Pamela Harper and Gina Montana. It was written by Lucy Alibar and Benh Zeitlin and directed by Benh Zeitlin. It will be released July 6th at Landmark Century Centre Cinema and Century 12 Evanston. It is rated PG-13.



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