

## Interview: Actress Gugu Mbatha-Raw is Directed 'Beyond the Lights'

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CHICAGO – The show business life is ripe for drama, and the new film “Beyond the Lights” explores the difficulties of the the superstar reaches of the music business, through a Beyoncé-type singer. Actress Gugu Mbatha-Raw plays Noni, and the film’s director is Gina Prince-Bythewood (“Love & Basketball”).



Minnie Driver and Gugu Mbatha-Raw in 'Beyond the Lights'

Photo credit: Relativity Media

Gugu Mbatha-Raw is making a name for herself, with two major releases this year, “Belle” and “Beyond the Lights.” The English actress is probably best remembered as the quirky student friend of Tom Hanks in “Larry Crowne.” Director Gina Prince-Bythewood is back in the spotlight after the well-received “Love & Basketball” in 2000. Since that time, she has directed HBO’s “Disappearing Acts” (2000) and “The Secret Life of Bees” (2008).

HollywoodChicago.com sat down to speak with both women during the 50th Chicago International Film Festival, where “Beyond the Lights” was the highlighted film during the “Black Perspectives” Gala night.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gugu, you’ve been around super famous people, and I’m sure you observed reactions to them. How did you apply that to your interpretation of the Noni’s character, in the sense that she becomes lost in that fame?

**Gugu Mbatha-Raw:** That’s one of the things that drew me to the project, the idea of fame – and how it impacts you psychologically – when all eyes are on you. You can’t do anything unobserved, which means you have to be ‘on’ all the time. For me, it was piecing together the research, through what we see everyday in the media and the old Hollywood stars like Marilyn Monroe, whose life was warped by the public’s

perception of her persona and star identity. The challenge on this film was to humanize that glamor, and find the real soul beneath it.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gina, what fascinates you about fame? What dark side of it did you want to place on the character of Noni that prevents her from being fully present in her fame?

**Gina Prince-Bythewood:** I don't think what happens in the film happens to every artist, I just thought it was interesting for this character. I really wanted to explore what happened to this little girl, whose dream was just to be a singer. She finds her passion in that, and what happens next when that drive becomes about success, and the consequences of it. When she followed that path, and created a hyper-sexuality – which is the circumstance of many artists today – what does that do to your soul, when it's not your authentic self? And what happens when you can't turn it off?

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There is a certain tone and a certain flavor that permeate your films, that seeks to create an overall atmosphere. Does that intentionally become part of the planning when you're writing a screenplay?

**Prince-Bythewood:** Absolutely. I think what makes a film work – especially a love story – is to make it just not about the love story, but also about the background story going on. For this film, it is the music world, and what the character of Noni is going through within this world. After that, it's simply about the research and filling that world with the authenticity. I realized that the audience sees this type of world on a daily basis, and I wanted to bring that world to life in a honest way.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gugu, we see in the film the use of hairstyles and wigs to create the character of Noni. What is your opinion about the psychology of hair for persons of color – such as wigs, weaves or just going natural?

**Mbatha-Raw:** It was great to work with Kim Kimball in the film, the hair designer, she would talk about stage hair, power hair and the idea that hair was part of Noni's persona. And ironically, it's the most artificial thing about her. For me, it represented the artificiality of the world she is in.

That was a very powerful scene that Gina wrote, when Noni takes out her fake hair, because in that is a reclaiming of her natural self. With my hair, it's just about the joy of playing characters, and exploring the different identities through this 'dress-up.' In my real life, I wash my hair, tie it in a bun and head off to yoga. [laughs] I don't think about it much outside of my work environment.



Gugu Mbatha-Raw at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival, 'Black Perspectives' Gala

*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gina, you've worked with the mostly middle class and upper middle class African Americans in 'Love & Basketball' and 'Beyond the Lights.' What challenges in society did you see or experience yourself at that socio-economic level, and overall with persons of color in our current environment?

**Prince-Bythewood:** I was adopted by white parents, and I grew up middle class. I have another brother who is black, and another sister who is blonde and blue eyed – so my upbringing was very interesting, and really fuels how I see the world. Just seeing the reaction of people around us looking at our family was an experience, but for me it was natural to look around and see people who were different.

The leads in my films are persons of color, but the films themselves are not about race. It's about putting characters on the screen who are mostly invisible in the media, and telling universal stories about them. I want people of all races to come to my films, and identify with the characters.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gugu, you've moved so quickly up the show business ladder in the last ten years. At what point during that time did you have the most significant leap, as far as the attention it gave you and the opportunities that came afterward?

**Mbatha-Raw:** Since I left drama school, I've been working fairly consistently, it's just been in different media, and they have different levels of profile. I worked initially in Britain for the theater, which doesn't reach a big audience. I then did British television, and made an American stage debut as Ophelia in 'Hamlet' – that was a big leap from the West End to Broadway. And I didn't have my career set for working in



America, that's just where the stage production ended up.

The more choices you get in this business, hopefully the more opportunity you get for being selective. In the last couple of years, what has been great about being in 'Belle' and 'Beyond the Lights' was working with female directors of color, telling female-centric stories. The 'leap,' to use your term, was about those two films.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gina, after the success of Love & Basketball in 2000, you worked sporadically in television until 'The Secret Life of Bees' in 2008. What was behind that eight year layoff from features, and what happened to you professionally after 'Love & Basketball' that prevented the next feature from happening right away?

**Prince-Bythewood:** I did HBO's 'Disappearing Acts' right after 'Love & Basketball,' and then I had a child, so I took a year off. And the reality is, I developed a couple of projects, and both of them didn't get picked up. It wasn't about me slacking, [laughs] it was about the circumstances of raising kids and finding a passion project.



Gina Prince-Bythewood at the 50th Chicago International Film Festival, 'Black Perspectives' Gala

*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Gugu, you were so memorable in 'Larry Crowne,' up against some real star power. What do you think Tom Hanks learned from you, especially as you created your key scenes together?

**Mbatha-Raw:** I have no idea, that's a question for him. [laughs] How about what I learned from him? He's such a generous actor, and

particularly with that film, it was light and romantic. His comic timing is so precise, and he had co-written the film, directed it and starred in it. With all those hats, he was a consummate professional, and really inspired the set, and it was a joyful place to be. And with his experience, he taught me how to lead a scene, and play a major role. It helped me subsequently to be a lead actress in a film. He also is a nice person on the set, and I want to be like that, otherwise nobody will want to work with you. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally for both of you, since this movie is about a singer, what song best defines you, either in your connection to it or what it says about your life?

**Prince-Bythewood:** As far as what was playing in the background when I wrote the film, and what becomes a central theme in it, is the song 'Blackbird' by Nina Simone. And honestly, you'd think it was written for the film, it's so perfectly attuned to what we were trying to say. That, and 'Pretty Hurts,' by Beyoncé. It also spoke to what the film is about.

**Mbatha-Raw:** Gina actually introduced me to a song that has become by new mantra in life, and it's in the film. Because when I was prepping this role, I had to listen to a lot of misogynistic music – and it was part of the research – but in my real life I'm very wary of what I plug into my subconscious mind – I want to be uplifted. So the song I became attached to was 'I Am Light,' by India.Arie. It was featured in the film very briefly, and was actually a significant moment for Noni, because she was at home and at ease.

*"Beyond the Lights" opens everywhere on November 14th. Featuring Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Minnie Driver, Nate Parker and Danny Glover. Written and directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood. Rated "PG-13"*



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [18]  
Writer, Editorial Coordinator  
HollywoodChicago.com  
[pat@hollywoodchicago.com](mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com) [17]

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