

## Interview: Director Lee Daniels, Star Gabourey Sidibe on 'Precious'

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- [Gabourey Sidibe](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Interview](#) [4]
- [Lee Daniels](#) [5]
- [Lenny Kravitz](#) [6]
- [Mariah Carey](#) [7]
- [MoNique](#) [8]
- [Oprah Winfrey](#) [9]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [10]
- [Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire](#) [11]
- [Sherri Shepherd](#) [12]
- [Tyler Perry](#) [13]

CHICAGO – One of the most talked about films this year is the Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey backed "Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire." Essential to the film is Gabourey Sidibe, who plays the title character of Precious.

Precious is the story of an overweight African American teenager in 1987 Harlem, who is about to have her second child. Rejected by almost every element of social order, including her immediate family, Precious is a story of survival in a world where certain people remain invisible.



Gabourey Sidibe as Precious and Paula Patton as Ms. Rain in 'Precious'  
*Photo credit: © Lionsgate*

During the Chicago International Film Festival in October, HollywoodChicago got to interview Gabourey Sidibe, along with her director Lee Daniels. Both participants in this one-of-a-kind production brought their perspective on the journey of both Precious and themselves.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Lee, this is by far one of the hottest and most talked about films of the year. Can you describe the path of the main players that got involved in this film and why it resonated with them so much as to get this film in the mainstream?

**Lee Daniels:** It was really an angel. Ally Sheedy's mother gave me the book to read. It blew me away, it rocked my soul, it stuck to me like hot grits. But the author at first wouldn't give me the rights to the book. I kept stalking her, and she finally gave me the book.

Most of the talent I gave the Geoffrey Fletcher adapted screenplay to already knew the story from the novel. And even if they didn't, they read the script and it stuck to them in the same way. It all starts with the word. And the word was so powerful that it trickled down to everyone involved in the production.

**HC:** Gabby, I saw that you had read the novel that the film is based on years before. What was the first thing you felt about Precious in relationship to yourself when you read the script?

**Gabourey Sidibe:** I felt like I knew her, certainly. I felt like I was related to her, she was a family member, a friend. But Precious is a person I didn't really want to be a friend with, she had a little too much drama. But I did feel guilty because the point of Precious is that she did feel neglected and ignored. And I've been part of the people who have neglected and ignored her. That guilt opened my heart, and I felt so much more compassion for her.

**HC:** Lee, there were actors in your film playing against their glamorous types to find the truth within the story. Were there any difficulties with these actors – Mo'Nique, Mariah C. and Sherri Shepard in particular – finding these characters because they are so outside their usual lives?

**LD:** No. Because under it all they are all actors. And they are also very good friends. When you have actors that believe in you, that have really given their spirit to play with, and they trust you, and you trust them, it shows on screen.

They gave me their respect and trust. When actors give you their spirit you owe it back to them.

**HC:** Gabby, how did you and Mo'Nique – playing Precious' mother Mary – communicate in your electric scenes together? What connection do you think Precious and Mary have, beyond their very difficult circumstances?

**GS:** Precious and Mary are enemies in a lot of ways. What people don't see is that Precious loves her Mother, she is the only Mother that she has ever known. She wants a better life now only for herself, but also for her Mother. While she doesn't understand all the abuse that Mary has handed to her, she still loves her.

In their apartment, though, they are enemies. Because Precious has never heard a kind word from Mary, she is always getting the worst part of her mother. And that defines the relationship between them on screen.

But Mo'Nique and Gabby have a completely different relationship, because we had to. The scenes between Precious and Mary are so intense, angry and emotional that Mo'Nique and I had to love each other double in order to survive the day. In the film she would throw a frying pan at me, Lee would yell 'cut,' and then we would hug. And dance. And sing.



Mo'Nique as Mary in 'Precious'  
Photo credit: © Lionsgate

**HC:** How important is it to tell stories like this to society in general? What revelations do you think will be communicated in regard to this level of poverty, especially of the spirit, in this subsection of the African American community?

**LD:** It's not just the African American community. It is a social economic issue that effects all of the underprivileged. Precious is a universal story, it is through me, an African American filmmaker, that the story is told. But when it was a play on the West End of London, the entire cast was white.

We are all Precious, but it just so happened to be that I stuck to the book's story. It is important to hit home that the 'Preciouses' of society are not forgotten. It is important to note that today, unlike the 1987 that the story is told in, that people don't fall through the cracks like they used to. It is a different world, but there are those that still get away with abuse.

The film is about abuse, but it also is about the will to survive. Also literacy, the power of the word and looking at yourself in the mirror and loving yourself, this is how deep Precious goes.

**HC:** Gabby, there is so much survival instinct that have to be learned at a young age in Precious' circumstance. What survival instincts do you



have in common with Precious?

**GS:** I have a lot, I was born in Brooklyn and raised in Harlem in New York. We probably have a lot of the same survival instincts. When Precious first meets Ms. Rain [Paula Patton] she doesn't trust her at first. She doesn't believe in trusting people, and that is a very New York instinct. That is something I know – never trust a stranger. I relate that completely back to Precious.

**HC:** You were involved with Monster's Ball and now Precious. Both dealt with African American women. Since historically in the race, matriarchs are very high status and responsibility in family structure, how do the stories of Leticia and Precious provide understanding to this very important gender?

**LD:** I don't agree that African American women have any different status than any other women. When we were at Sundance, a 70-year old Japanese lady started bawling in my hands, crying. I would have agreed with you about African American women in particular before I did this film, but we have been around the world and the story is about women in general, and their mechanism to survive.

When I started out making this, I thought it was about black women and in the end it changed my view about all women.

**HC:** Gabby, the facial expressions that you decided on for Precious, the blank mask that defined her, was that a natural expression for you or did you have to find it for the character?

**GS:** (laughs) We called it the 'One Face.' The funny thing is that when I'm bored or in a daydream, it's a family trait. We purse our lips out like that [demonstrates]. When you're on a film set, waiting, and Lee saw me through the lens naturally going to that face, he said 'that's it, that face!' And I said what? And he said make that face again. I didn't want to because it was ugly (laughs). Lee said, 'it's not ugly, do it!' When the rest of my family sees this film, they are going to fall out because it's a family trait to do that expression.

**LD:** The expression is honest. Oftentimes I'd let the camera roll after I said cut and then I would try to find the truth in what the girls were doing. When they were just being and then capture it. Then I'd say do that, right now. Because that is the truth, and that's what I wanted to capture.



Director Lee Daniels, Gabourey Sidibe and Patrick McDonald in Chicago,  
October 14, 2009.

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

**HC:** Lee, what advantages do Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey give to the representation of African American and general American spirit? Is it some ways equal to Barack Obama on another level?

**LD:** Yes. I would be embarrassed to bring my Mother, for example, to meet Tyler Perry ever, because she would probably jump him, she loves him so much (laughs). She lives for him. He has that effect on black Americans. We idolize him for what he has done, what he has built, with his entertainment empire.

And the same thing with Oprah. Outside of being really sexy, she is just a Goddess, a Goddess that walks on air.

**HC:** Last Question for Gabby. What do you want Precious to represent for other "Precious" type girls in the poverty and hopelessness areas of cities and towns in this country?

**GS:** Certainly hope. The thing about Precious is that life keeps throwing things at her and hitting her in the face. But she never lies down. Even the one time it looked like she was going to, Ms. Rain tells her to continue, and she does.

She is a warrior, and her only weapon is hope. Hope for the future, hope for a better life. And she keeps moving toward it. And that is what I want people to take away. You can never count yourself out. Never.

*"Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire" has a limited release on November 6th. Check local listings for theaters. Featuring Gabourey Sibide, Mo'Nique, Paula Patton, Mariah Carey, Sherri Shepherd and Lenny Kravitz, directed by Lee Daniels. Rated "R"*



[14]

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