

# Mo’Nique, PUSH Interview, Sundance 2009

By Eric Kohn

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**Lee Daniels’** *Push* has proven to be one of the most divisive high profile movies at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. Splitting audiences is nothing to new Daniels, whose *Shadowboxer* remains generally maligned, but *Push* at least plays well to a good number of people. A heavily stylized account of troubled, overweight Harlem teen Precious (newcomer **Gabourey Sidibe**), who has been impregnated by her mother’s boyfriend, the movie barrels forward with a frenetic pace.

While some people think *Push* is too obvious or jarring — I don’t — one performer unarguably reaches her full emotional potential: Mo’Nique, boldly playing against type as Mary, Precious’s crazed single mom. The true villain of the movie, she’s also its tragic centerpiece. The usually, delightfully raunchy comedian turns in a forceful, haunting performance that prompted one audience member, after the premiere on Friday, to ask her what she plans to wear when she wins an Oscar. “Nothing,” she replied. A few days later, over coffee on Main

Street, we asked **Mo’Nique** to elaborate on her dynamic accomplishment.

**It looked like the cast was having a really emotional moment together during the Q&A.**

I think when we all saw it in its entirety, it was, “Look at what we did.” It’s very honest and I think to get that honest, it brings up emotions, because you start asking yourself questions. You don’t realize until you’re in it, until you see the credits. It’s like, Wow! It takes your breath away. □ □ **In your stand-up, you’re usually energized, upbeat and optimistic. Here, you play this incredibly damaged woman. What accounts for the change of pace?**

Mr. Daniels. When he called me up, he said — and I’m going to quote him — “Mo’Nique, this could fuck up your career.” I said, “Sign me up.” Oftentimes, I think that people want to put us in a box. You can only do this, or you can only do that. But when you are an entertainer, it’s like, baby, whatever you bring, let’s entertain it. Let’s do it.

**So you were waiting for an offer to fuck up your career.**

I wasn’t necessarily waiting for someone to ask, but it’s Lee Daniels. When I did *Shadowboxer* with him, it was such a different role. He’s kept his word to me. The first time I met him, he said, “I have something for you. It’s going to be totally different; something that people can’t imagine seeing you do.” He kept his word.

**Was it difficult to do something so different from your stand-up work?**

It’s different, because I’m normally laughing and having a great time. It’s a joyful situation. So, yes, it’s different, but it was appreciated because Mary is so honest. That’s what I really dug about it. I remember when we first got the script and my husband looked at that. He said, “This is what people get Oscars for.” We laughed. Now here we are.

**You deliver a fairly intense monologue at the end of the movie that really ties it together. Do you see Mary as a sympathetic character?**

Yes, I think that all of us know Mary. I had to put her shoes on. If I were that person, I would want forgiveness. You do feel sorry for her because you begin to understand she's mentally ill. She ain't just being a bitch. She's sick, and the society that we're in, they threw her away. Nobody asked any questions, nobody got involved. That illness doesn't just start. People know for years. We wanted to bring that world and put it right in your face. To say, they exist; they're your neighbor. It might be your mother; it might be your sister. It might be you. What we were trying to do is not make it an action-and-cut Hollywood movie. I think Mr. Daniels did a great job.

**What guidance did he provide?**

He said, "I need you to be a monster," and that was it: "Be a monster. I need people to hate that character." Then he asked me before we started filming, "Do you think that everybody gets redemption?" I said, "No, especially if you don't ask for forgiveness and mean it." The moment he said action, the monster she was.

**You brought to the table what you understood about the character.**

Well, I was molested. The person who molested me was a monster. So I had to go to that person, because I know what it was like for me. [Daniels] said action, and be that monster.

**There has been talk that the movie is a tough sell. How do you see it working in the marketplace?**

It's honest. You can't be afraid, and you have to go and work at being fearless. If you go into it saying, well, if I don't believe it, then you won't believe it. As long as I believe it, you will believe it. This is a universal film. Do you know what I mean?

**That's what I wrote in my review.**

It's all over the world - molestation and abuse, mental and verbal. It's all over. It's not just black. It's not just white. It's every color, every walk. It's everywhere. I

haven't met any Martians, but I promise if we have some, it is going on with them, too.

**If the movie comes out sometime soon, would you go on the road for it?**

Yes, because I believe that everyone needs to see it. Do you know how many people suffer from molestation and mental abuse? They never tell their story, and they stay imprisoned for the rest of their life.

**There are still only a certain number of mainstream movies released each year with predominantly black casts.**

It is totally up to us to change that. When you say, "It's a black movie," what makes it a black movie? Because we are all black people? When have you ever said, "It's a white movie"? It's just a movie. The moment we stop making that separation, it becomes a movie and the people just happen to be black, but it is so universal.

**Are you looking to do more dramatic work?**

I'm looking to keep playing. Whatever that playtime is, that's what it is. I am excited; I own the rights to Hattie McDaniel. I'm excited about that. I think that's a story that has to be told, because of all of the doors she opened and kicked down so that I could walk through.

**Will you play McDaniel?**

Yes. I will be honored, because of the greatness of who that woman was, all that she did, and all the fights she had to have to make it so. One black in the city of a few, how could you not honor her?

**How did you feel about George Clooney mentioning McDaniel in his Oscar acceptance speech for *Syriana* as proof of Hollywood's progressiveness?**

When George Clooney says it, it's validated. Why is that? He was quite honest,

and I appreciate him as a human being for putting out that honesty. But when he says it, why is it that it become validated? I appreciate the fact that he recognized brilliance. I appreciate that, but we've been saying it for years. We've been saying it out loud for years. The moment he says it, it is validated. The media does that. The industry does that.

**Will you ever stop doing stand-up comedy?**

I will never stop stand-up. That is my baby; that is my love. You are your own director and writer. You are everything, right in the moment. There is no, "Cut, let's do a retake." It is right [clap] there.

**Even if you win an Oscar?**

I will probably go and do stand-up that night.