

WITH ...

Denzel Washington, Man on Fire

The actor never leans in — he's all in. And in his latest, "Macbeth," conjured by Joel Coen, he is as sharp and deadly as a dagger.

By **Maureen Dowd** **The New York Times** Dec. 4, 2021

When Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand began rehearsing to play the Macbeths, he asked her how she thought the couple had met. Oh, she replied blithely, the Macbeths met when they were 15. They were Romeo and Juliet, but they didn't commit suicide. They just stayed married for 50 years. But they didn't have any kids and his career stalled, so thinking legacy, they suddenly went gangster and killed their nice, old friend, the king. "This is one of the only good marriages in Shakespeare," said Joel Coen, who adapted and directed "The Tragedy of Macbeth," opening widely on Christmas Day. "They just happen to be plotting a murder." James Shapiro, a Shakespeare scholar at Columbia, backed up the director, adding dryly, "But there's not much competition, is there? The Capulets? Richard II and his nameless Queen? Richard III and the doomed widow, Anne?"

Now Mr. Coen and Ms. McDormand, who are married and who met on the Coen brothers' debut feature, the 1984 film noir "Blood Simple," have teamed up with Mr. Washington to do another noir, the Scottish saga of "Blood will have blood." As in all film noirs, the guy is a sap and the lady is trouble. Lady Macbeth pushes her husband into killing Duncan by taunting him about his manhood.

When you watch Ms. McDormand — who defied all Hollywood odds to become a soaring star in middle age, specializing in playing women who, as she puts it, "are not necessarily redeemable" — you absolutely believe she has the will for regicide. Mirroring the plot of "Macbeth," Ms. McDormand pestered her reluctant husband until he gave in and agreed to direct the movie — without his (also reluctant) brother, Ethan, no less. "Frances McDormand is a beast," Mr. Washington said, admiringly.

A few weeks into filming, she asked her leading man if she had earned the right to call him "D," as some close to him do. "Sure," he replied. Mr. Coen was amazed at what it was like to work with the pair, an old-school Hollywood matchup of titans. "They are such powerful, intuitive and fascinating performers," he said. "You were just floored by what happened on the set." He shot in a square "academy" format, so it's all about the faces of Mr. Washington and Ms. McDormand filling the frame.

"The three of us are at the top of our game," Ms. McDormand said. "Denzel's 66. I'm 64. Joel is 67. We're still taking risks. We're still willing to fall flat on our faces. Working with Denzel was delicious because of all those things." It was a tricky artistic three-way. She said that her husband had to trust that "Denzel and I weren't going to gang up on him as actors," and Denzel had to trust that she and Joel "weren't going to be too intimate as husband and wife."

Over coffee at a Midtown Manhattan hotel, the morning after the movie's buzzy premiere at the New York Film Festival, Mr. Washington looked casual in black Under Armour sweats, but seemed beat. He said he had gotten very little sleep. He had just put the final touches on a film he directed, "A Journal for Jordan," the true story of the romance between Dana Canedy, a former New York Times reporter and editor, and Sgt. Charles Monroe King, a soldier who was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq, after meeting their infant son only once. It stars Michael B. Jordan and Chanté Adams and also opens widely on Christmas Day.

“It’s just a beautiful story of loss and love,” Mr. Washington said, “a story about real heroes and sacrificing, men and women who have given their lives so that we have the freedom to complain.” (The star, who has [played a policeman more than a dozen times](#), recently made similar comments of respect for cops who put their lives on the line.)

Image



Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand in a still from “The Tragedy of Macbeth.” Credit...Alison Cohen Rosa/A24

He said that before his 97-year-old mother died a few months ago, he promised her that he would “attempt to honor her and God by living the rest of my days in a way that would make her proud. So that’s what I’m trying to do.” “I’m more interested in directing because I’m more interested in helping others,” he said. “What I do, what I make, what I made — all of that — is that going to help me on the last day of my life? It’s about, Who have you lifted up? Who have we made better? “This is spiritual warfare. So, I’m not looking at it from an earthly perspective. If you don’t have a spiritual anchor you’ll be easily blown by the wind and you’ll be led to depression.”

Sounding like his father, a Pentecostal minister who died in 1991 — “That’s what got my father, he couldn’t give up the meat and fried foods” — Mr. Washington asked me: “Have you read the Bible? Start with the New Testament, because the Old Testament is harder. You get caught up in the who-begot-who-begot-who thing.” He said he wants to mentor young actors like Mr. Jordan, Ms. Adams and Corey Hawkins, who [did an acclaimed turn as Dr. Dre](#) in “Straight Outta Compton,” and now plays Macduff, the lord who beheads Macbeth.

Mr. Washington talked about working with the late Chadwick Boseman last year on his final film, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” Even before he met Mr. Boseman, Mr. Washington had agreed to Phylicia Rashad’s request to help pay the young actor’s tuition, along with eight other students at Howard

University, to go to a summer acting program in England. “He was a brave young man, strong, and he had a strong woman next to him,” Mr. Washington recalled. “Once, I remember going in the trailer and thinking, Something is going on there. I didn’t know what it was. Nobody did. Bless him. He kept it to himself and did his job. But he needed the time between takes to get his energy back.”

Mr. Hawkins said that he sometimes prayed with Mr. Washington on the “Macbeth” set in Burbank. “Sometimes we get talking and you see the preacher in him,” the younger actor said. “He’s just a natural-born charismatic leader who is not afraid to talk about his own faults or misgivings or shortcomings.”

Mr. Washington was eager to go to directing school under Mr. Coen, saying, “Joel is just a genius, focused.” Alex Hassell, a British actor who plays the Scottish royal, Ross, as a “sexy Rasputin,” said that Mr. Washington often pressed Mr. Coen to explain his technique: “Denzel would be asking, ‘Why this? Why that?’ He was so excited to get to work with Joel.” Mr. Hassell said that Mr. Washington could go so “deep in his cortex” that watching him was hypnotic, and he would sometimes forget to act. “I’d be like, ‘Oh my God, oh, hang on. I was supposed to be there as well.’ It might have just been him coming out of a tent. There is some quality that some people have which you just want to bottle.”

I read Mr. Washington a quote from Maya Angelou: “Denzel Washington appears to me a classical contradiction,” she said in the March 1994 issue of Ebony magazine. “He is totally contained as a vault of rare gems and is as totally accessible as air.” He smiled, saying, “Beats a sharp stick in the eye, I guess.” I wondered how he maintains an air of mystery in this oversharing era. “If they see you free all week, they won’t pay to see you on the weekend,” the star said. “I don’t tweet. I don’t have Instagram. I embrace my inner analog.”

I told Mr. Washington that he is so peerless at speaking Shakespearean verse in a conversational way, he could be the love child of John Gielgud and Spencer Tracy. “That’s 45 years of training,” he said. When he was growing up in Mount Vernon, N.Y., a mentor told him, “Your natural ability will only take you so far.” With that in mind, after playing Othello at Fordham, he started searching for a school that would give him a foundation in the classics and ended up attending graduate school at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco. “The whole thing with Joel and Fran was, they wanted ‘No stick-up-the-butt Shakespeare,’” the actor said. They wanted “dope Shakespeare,” Mr. Hawkins added.

Todd Black, Mr. Washington’s producing partner, who worked with him on the movie versions of August Wilson’s “Fences” and “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” said: “His whole thing with young people is ‘Don’t act.’ He will stop an audition cold and say ‘You’re acting, please don’t act.’ He always checks their résumés to see if they’ve done theater.”

I asked Mr. Washington if Hollywood had become more diverse after #OscarsSoWhite. “Hollywood is a street,” he said. “I live in Los Angeles. I don’t live in Hollywood. I don’t know what Hollywood thinks. It’s not like it’s a bunch of people who get together on Tuesdays.” When The Times’s movie critics put Mr. Washington atop their list of the [greatest 25 actors of the 21st century \(so far\)](#), Manohla Dargis said that his dominance “is a corrective and rebuke to the racist industry in which he works.” “OK,” he said, chuckling, when I asked him about it. “You know, put the work out there and then people decide it’s this, it’s that.”

There were some who thought that after the Black Lives Matter protests, having a Black Macbeth would cause the play to resonate in a different way. At the start, Mr. Washington asked Mr. Coen about the black and white of it all. But it turned out he was just asking the director whether he was going to film in black and white. Mr. Washington believes that if you look at everything through the

lens of a political agenda, you lose the plot as an artist. The director and his stars wanted to make a “Macbeth” that was universal, not topical.

Ms. McDormand told me that she was not interested in modern interpretations of Macbeth as an emblem of toxic masculinity, or in correcting the stereotype of Lady Macbeth as a harriidan. “It’s banal” to make Shakespeare politically correct, she sniffed. “It’s bigger than that.” But the casting still makes a difference. A fan approached Mr. Hawkins to tell him how amazing it was to see two Black actors, representing good and evil — Macduff and Macbeth — in the final, searing sword battle on a bridge.

‘Fear Is Contaminated Faith’

Mr. Coen goes for abstraction and chiaroscuro in the movie. Besides removing color, all the costumes and sets are stripped of ornamentation. The gray gloaming and hallucinatory mists envelop a spare and savage landscape, with the witches shape shifting into three black birds. The disorienting first scene features the whispery, scratchy voice of the staggering British actress Kathryn Hunter, who plays one witch divided into three; she sounds like she’s gurgling blood.

It’s Mr. Coen’s first cinematic adventure since his brother [traded the silver screen for the stage](#) — “Of course, I missed him,” Joel told me — and he doesn’t want us to know if we’re in Macbeth’s wild mind or on the wild moors. “It’s the essence of Joel, I have to say,” Ms. McDormand said.

The director was careful about fiddling with the verse, noting, “You don’t want to sing the song without the melody.” In keeping with the vision of a “postmenopausal” Macbeth, they did change a line Macbeth speaks to his wife: “Bring forth men-children only/For thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but male.” “Should compose” has become “should have composed.” “They’re a couple at the end of their ambition, not at the beginning of their ambition,” Ms. McDormand said. “In our interpretation, she starts realizing that she’s become expendable and that’s what drives her insane, not the fact that they kill Duncan and there’s blood on her hands. She’s given up her soul to the dark forces, and he’s not confiding in her anymore. He’s not asking for her help.” The actress said that, for her and “D,” their long marriages provided insight: “Denzel and Pauletta have been married as long as Joel and I have. We had to learn how to be parents together and life partners together because it’s an ever-changing landscape.”

Mr. Coen said he wasn’t scared of the Macbeth curse “until Covid shut us down on Friday the 13th in March 2020.” But Mr. Washington was never worried. “I’m a God-fearing man,” he said. “I try not to worry. Fear is contaminated faith.”

Unlike some other top movie stars, Mr. Washington is just as comfortable playing villains, antiheroes and deeply flawed men as he is portraying heroes. If there was ever any pressure on him, as there was on leading Black actors like Sidney Poitier back in the day, to choose saintly, role-model parts rather than demonic, criminal parts, he ignored it. “What he decides he will do, he will do,” said Brian Grazer, who produced Mr. Washington’s hits “American Gangster” and “Inside Man.” “What he decides he won’t do, he won’t do.”

The actor is nonpareil at playing lethal and unpredictable. His eyes can go dead and scary, full of razor blades, even as he offers that magnetic smile. In life, as in art, Mr. Grazer said, you know that this is not a guy you want to mess with. Mr. Washington was chilling as the bodyguard out for revenge in the 2004 film “Man on Fire,” and as the sociopathic L.A.P.D. narcotics cop Alonzo Harris in the 2001 thriller “Training Day,” for which he won an Oscar. ““Training Day,” I ad-libbed, like, 50 percent of what you hear,” Mr. Washington said. The director, Antoine Fuqua, used real Los Angeles gang

members named Bone, Killer and Hitman as extras. “We had a lot of real folks that had done real things, so I used those people. I learned from those people.”

Ethan Hawke, who was taken on a terrifying ride as Jake Hoyt, Mr. Washington’s tyro partner in that film, recalled the actor’s threat of violence. “It was like playing music with Miles Davis or baseball with Babe Ruth,” said Mr. Hawke, who was nominated for an Oscar for best supporting actor for his role. “Denzel changed my life. To be 30 and get to work with one of the greats of all time? I’ve never seen anybody be a flat-out better storyteller. He knows what the audience is thinking. He knows how to surprise them. His imagination is so thorough. “The greats can play offense and defense, and most people can’t. Jack Nicholson, Gene Hackman and Denzel manage to be equally compelling as protagonist and antagonist.”

Mr. Washington’s other co-stars are equally effusive. Meryl Streep talked to me about his “mesmeric power over an audience” onstage. Tom Hanks said, about their dazzling duet in “Philadelphia”: “I sat beside him for three weeks shooting the trial. I had no dialogue. It was a thriller of an acting class. He follows no rules but pursues the moment. No nonsense, but a looseness that can’t be faked. A one-on-one scene with him is a game of hardball catch — he is both daring you to keep up and propelling you to do more. “He is our Brando. Nicholson. Olivier. And, like me, he steals office supplies and notebooks from the set dressing.” Mr. Hanks recalled that, at one point on the set, “We were talking about our New York City days as broke actors — about the same age, peers, trying to learn craft and get work. I noted that we were in the same boat at the same time. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘But you could catch a cab in Manhattan.’”

Rehearsing in the Dark

Those who know Mr. Washington say he can be guarded; he can be suspicious of putting himself in others’ hands, or of being taken out of context because he doesn’t want to play into someone else’s narrative. He keeps it low key, driving himself places without a posse. He isn’t a regular on the Hollywood party scene.

Actors who work with him are never sure where they stand. He can be charming or elusive, but not buddy-buddy. “I did not try to be his friend, hang out at a Lakers game or go to birthday parties,” Mr. Hawke said. “I just wanted to offer him my best.” Melissa Leo has worked with him in three movies — “Flight” and two of the “Equalizer” ones — and still calls him “Mr. Washington.” Ms. McDormand agreed: “He’s actually a really lovely human being but he does really need to protect his process. He has a very trusted team of people that he’s worked with for years, that was his pod.” When Liev Schreiber starred with Mr. Washington in “The Hurricane,” he said he expected a friendly Denzel and got a prickly Hurricane instead. “I thought he really hated me,” Mr. Schreiber said. But later, he got a call from Jonathan Demme about appearing in “The Manchurian Candidate” remake with Mr. Washington, who had pushed for him. “I was completely shocked by that,” Mr. Schreiber said. But, he added, Mr. Washington plumbs such dangerous and painful depths as an actor, that small talk could be distracting. “I never worked with an actor who seemed to care more.” Mr. Grazer said that Mr. Washington told him that he wouldn’t play Frank Lucas in “American Gangster” unless the Harlem murderer and drug trafficker was shown paying for his crimes in the end.

Bruno Delbonnel, the brilliant French cinematographer for “The Tragedy of Macbeth,” said that he is accustomed to being the first on set at 5 a.m., so he was surprised to see Mr. Washington beating him there. “Denzel was there, always,” he said. “It was a competition between him and me. He tried to beat me, because he was rehearsing alone for an hour or so on set with no light. Just himself walking on set and trying to have a feeling of what he could do.”

Mr. Washington doesn't whine. Spike Lee made his displeasure clear when Mr. Washington lost the Oscar in 1993 for his stunning performance in "Malcolm X" to Al Pacino for "Scent of a Woman," but Mr. Washington said graciously that if he had won, "I would have felt badly. It was Pacino's time."

When he accepted the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award in 2019, it was clear that he was getting more publicly spiritual. He [called himself](#) a vessel of God and played an old video of his late father-in-law talking about how we must love and care for one another. He talked disdainfully about the "Twitter-tweet-meme-mean world that we've created" and said we'd better do our best to "turn this thing around" for young people.

He continued this theme at our coffee. "The enemy is the inner me," he said. "The Bible says in the last days — I don't know if it's the last days, it's not my place to know — but it says we'll be lovers of ourselves. The No. 1 photograph today is a selfie, 'Oh, me at the protest.' 'Me with the fire.' 'Follow me.' 'Listen to me.' "We're living in a time where people are willing to do anything to get followed. What is the long or short-term effect of too much information? It's going fast and it can be manipulated obviously in a myriad of ways. And people are led like sheep to slaughter." In heaven, he said, "there are going to be two lines, the long line and the short line, and I'm interested in being in the short line."

He advises me to read The Daily Word, an inspirational message that has an app. (As I write, the daily word is "compassion.") "You have to fill up that bucket every morning," he said. "It's rough out there. You leave the house in the morning. Here they come, chipping away. By the end of the day, you've got to refill that bucket. We know right from wrong." As he left, he turned back to remind me: "Get that Daily Word."