**Sept. 16, 2022 / The Woman King**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

*<CLIP> When the wind blows, our ancestors push us to march into battle against those who enslave us!*

NOEL KING (host): I went to see a movie last Friday! The Woman King. Loved it! The ancestors would love it. Today, it’s out in theaters.

It’s set 200 years ago in the West African Kingdom of Dahomey - which was a real place.

Viola Davis plays a ferocious general named Nanisca, who leads an army of women soldiers against European slavers and an enemy African tribe.

*<CLIP> We fight not just for today, but for the future! We are the spear of victory! We are the blade of freedom!*

The women warriors of Dahomey were also real. As is this uncomfortable truth: their kingdom got rich in part by capturing and selling its enemies into slavery.

Coming up on Today Explained: the director tells us how she balanced a history that is both triumphant and tragic.

**[THEME]**

It’s Today Explained. I’m Noel King.

The director Gina Prince-Bythewood has proven herself in Hollywood. Love & Basketball. Beyond the Lights. The Old Guard. But when she pitched The Woman King, it was almost like Hollywood executives forgot her distinguished resume. She wanted to make an action movie starring Black women. Set two centuries ago. Where men are barely onscreen. And Hollywood was like…?

GINA PRINCE-BYTHEWOOD (director of The Woman King): You know, Hollywood is a fascinating place, in that people speak on wanting original stories, yet they continually fall back on what's familiar, because what's familiar is safe. There's a proven track record to that. So when you come out with original content, which, me as an audience, that's what I get excited about. It's a harder sell. It's certainly a harder sell when it's a movie, a historical epic, which is absolutely a genre that's been dominated by male stories and male heroes and male protagonists and villains. And certainly we've never seen this with Black women before.

NOEL: And so what was your attitude going into the room with people who you knew might be skeptics?

GINA: I would like to say my enthusiasm and passion for this. When I read the script, I saw the movie.

NOEL: Mmm.

GINA: And I feel like I'm my first audience and the movie in my head was exactly the type of movie I would die to see. And so it was bringing that passion into the room. But not only the passion, but the swagger of, ‘everything I'm telling you I want this film to be, I can do. Because my body of work has shown you that I can do that.’

*<CLIP> The Old Guard: Charlize Theron: You really wanna do this, kid?” [fade fighting underneath next section]*

GINA: And certainly having The Old Guard on my resume at that point was absolutely helpful in their belief that, yes, she could do the action and do these big set pieces well.

*<CLIP> let fighting sound play in the clear for a second, then fade down*

GINA: People discount what passion can do. When you go into a room, you're convincing somebody to give you millions of dollars. They have to be inspired and excited by your vision. And so that’s really what I came in with.

NOEL: This is a movie that is based on real historical events and a real historical kingdom, which, of course, makes things more complicated. When you approached this movie, did you have some amount of trepidation about how you would make the history come alive and how you would deal with some of the, some of the historical challenges.

GINA: I wouldn’t say, it wasn't intimidation, I think because historical epics are some of my favorite films. You know, Braveheart.

*<CLIP> Braveheart, Mel Gibson: "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom!"*

GINA: I've watched it 100 times. I loved that film, Last of the Mohicans, Gladiator. You know, these films that are set in a true time in history. And yet there is some inventiveness in terms of the characters and your ability to tell personal stories within that. So I knew going in the balance that I wanted to have, and the confidence in that and the excitement and being able to tell the story of this kingdom, like that's an extra thing to know that these women were real, that this David and Goliath battle that they had was real, and the stakes were real, and the reasons for it were real, that this kingdom was real, that the politics and gender politics were real. I just kept getting more excited as I got deeper into, into the research because I, I saw more truth and more authenticity that I could pour into the story.

SCORING IN <The Woman King soundtrack: Final Test>

NOEL: A lot of the movies that you seem to admire, those movies center men. They always have, right?

GINA: <laughs> Yes.

NOEL: And this is one where you just were not doing that. Viola Davis is not just the star, she’s the beating heart of the movie. The rest of the main cast are all women. Did you know you were making something that would be game changing, if it was done right?

GINA: I guess I looked at it as, I knew we were doing something that hadn't been done before. That was exciting as an artist to be able to do that. And I knew because of that, and who was fronting this movie, who were the heroes in this movie, I feel like I had more pressure and I'm saying self-imposed pressure on getting it right. I needed people to be able to go to this movie and just be enthralled by these warriors.

SCORING BUMP

GINA: When I started watching it as we were cutting it together, The smiles I would find myself doing when I'm just looking up on the screen and seeing these characters. It's like, ‘oh, we did this and I get to watch this anytime I want. I get to turn on our editing monitors and watch these warriors, these Black women being heroes.’ And that, that was really exciting.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: I want to ask you about the history here, because some of this is difficult. There was a kingdom of Dahomey. And one of the ways in which this kingdom became very wealthy was that they did capture their enemies and sell them to European slave traders. A lot of this was going on in West Africa at the time.

GINA: Yes.

NOEL: And that is a very difficult thing for a filmmaker, I would imagine, because your heroes are part of a kingdom that is doing this thing that is appalling and historically one of the most terrible things that has ever happened. How did you wrestle with: my good women are part of a kingdom that is doing this awful thing?

GINA: Mm hmm. It was the knowledge that at the time that we're setting this, that the kingdom was at a crossroads – and a legit crossroads – of half of this kingdom and its people wanting to abolish being a part of the trade and the other half wanting to keep it because it gave them their wealth. And being able to use these women as that voice of wanting to change. And so being able to deal with, yes, they did this, but there was a fight and a young king, Ghezo, was in the middle of this, trying to decide which way to go and ultimately deciding to go against it, knowing that that could affect his reign, which, you know, for me personally, I find heroic in that he potentially gave up his power to do the right thing.

NOEL: You're referring to a theme throughout the movie. But there's one very vivid scene in which Viola Davis's character, who plays the general Nanisca, tries to convince the king, played by John Boyega, to give up the slave trade and instead make money off of the production of palm oil, which is something that the Kingdom of Dahomey has a lot of. And he says slave trading is why we prosper. And she says, but at what price? Historically, did that conversation happen?

GINA: Oh, absolutely. They had the potential and they ultimately did go to palm oil production as their main source of income. Did it happen specifically with Nanisca? Nanisca’s an amalgamation of a number of different people, but that is the direction that they ultimately went to. This was the story. And there were moments where some felt it would have been easier to not focus on that and make it easy. And I wasn't going to do that. We had to be truthful.

NOEL: Okay. Okay. There was so much about this movie visually. The costumes, the landscapes, the weapons, the architecture, the music, the dancing. You created an intensely convincing world, and that's a very hard thing to pull off. How much time did you spend trying to make this absolutely authentic as a portrayal of Dahomey in 1823? And how much did you say, no one except historians really knows what it looks like. We can take some creative liberties. Tell me about the decisions that went into that.

GINA: The decision was immediate. We are going to be as authentic as possible. And that meant me and all my department heads were tasked with doing a deep dive into the research. And, foremost, it was separating truth from those who had, you know, a definitive reason to make us seem like savages and really take away our humanity in the way that they described the kingdom and the people and what they were about and the things that they did with those who didn't, who were telling the truth. We found these couple of journals written by missionaries who made the trip, and that was invaluable. And, this was pre-photographs, which makes it difficult. So it was great, though, to be able to look at the different sources and piece together what they would have worn, the social dynamics, how they had that equality within the council because of the two gods that were their main deities, which were a man and a woman. And so having that equality within the palace, despite the patriarchy outside of the palace, how the women trained, the fact that they created these elaborate, choreographed dances. And the fact that the palace, some of the palace is still there. And so we were able to recreate exactly what the palace would look like. It was, we have to do this the right way. We have to be authentic. We are telling the truth. Again, it's not a documentary, but we are world building and we're putting an audience into this world that they haven't seen before. And so you need to be as accurate as possible.

SCORING IN <The Woman King soundtrack: The Final Battle>

NOEL: What do you want your audience to take away from this?

GINA: There's a couple of things certainly. I want all audiences to be able to come out of here and just think, I just saw an incredible movie and incredible warriors. And it doesn't matter that they didn't look like me. I just saw them. I saw this film, and I felt it. And I want women to be able to watch this and be inspired and understand that we have an innate warrior within us. I wish I had this when I was little because, like, I was an athlete and the amount of times I was told something was wrong with me because I like sports and didn't want to wear dresses and just gravitated towards athletics, to normalize being a warrior and normalizing who these women were. And not just that they were badass, but also that their vulnerability was the strength, that the sisterhood, that depth of living and dying for each other. I want women to feel that. And I want Black women to be able to see themselves in a way that we've never seen ourselves and take that in, ingest it and walk differently.

SCORING BUMP

Coming up, how close does the movie get to the real Kingdom of Dahomey? And we talk to a descendant of the women warriors.

SCORING OUT

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

*<CLIP> Agojie!! Wu Suu!! Agojie!! Wu Suu!! Agojie!! Wu Suu!!*

It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King.

And I promise you: you cannot watch The Woman King with all the faces and the landscapes and the incredible fight scenes without thinking: what was the kingdom of Dahomey really like?

Leonard Wantchekon is an economist; he teaches at Princeton. And he served as an advisor on The Woman King because he is originally from Benin, where the kingdom of Dahomey used to be. He studies the Agojie, the women warriors, who are also sometimes called the Dahomey Amazons. And he is a descendent of one of those women. That is mind-blowing, Leonard. Growing up in Benin, as you did, did you learn about the kingdom of Dahomey? Did you learn about the women soldiers?

LEONARD WANTCHEKON (political economist at Princeton University): Yes. Yes, in fact. Three things. First of all, one of the training centers of Amazons was actually about one mile from my hometown.

NOEL: Wow.

LEONARD: And I realized later on that someone from my extended family called Essayi, was actually a female warrior. And like, her son, called Narcisse, who was, you know, the enforcer, because, you know, I was not always well-behaved. So he's the one who my mother sent me to him to yell a bit at me and stuff. I realized that Narcisse was the eldest son of Essayi. So, in fact, I grew up in an environment that had an Amazon. There is another town I realized much later on, like three miles from where I was born, that also had an Amazon who was known in the whole region, as, you know, one of the leaders of anti-colonial movement, domestic, I mean, like in Benin, around 1940s. So, yes, I knew that it was there, but it's only recently through the research that I'm doing that actually got names, realized that I have neighbors or neighbors of my grandparents who were actually, female warriors. And it just made me very, very proud and even more determined to be able to tell their story.

LEONARD: The fun part is to dig into details of the history of the kingdom of Dahomey. You know, like food, like, you know, whether the King go to battle with the warriors, what the female warriors wear and details that the typical historian doesn't get into. And you need that for the movie to be as accurate as possible and to reflect the local history, local culture as possible.

NOEL: The movie begins in 1823. How did this kingdom get to be a kingdom? And who lived there? What was it like?

LEONARD: It was a group of princes from a place called Tado who moved out of a kingdom and decided to settle in various part of current Benin. And those who came to the Abomey Plateau, where the kingdom was set up, they developed into an extremely sophisticated and very modern state, particularly under King Ghezo, that was portrayed in the movie. And they fought for their independence and their sovereignty against other local states. And then in that process, the women, you know, the Amazons, played a major, major, major role. And they have a very relatively thriving economy, obviously very involved in the slave trade, but also there were plantations and they have some industry, they have international trade. But what was so distinguished is also the culture, the music, the arts. And recently there were some art artifacts stolen by the colonizers that was in Paris for centuries that was brought back. It was highly, highly sophisticated.

SCORING IN <The Woman King soundtrack: Whiskey For Izogie>

LEONARD: What we are not seeing actually, the fact that they were normal girls growing up in environments where women were brought up to do anything, involved in agricultural activities and cultural activities. And they play with boys in a very gender inclusive environment. And that's what allowed many of them to be very assertive, very strong, very independent. And that's what led to the institution itself, led the idea of setting up an army for just women, where, through many rituals, they learn to be fearless and they learn to be extremely brave.

*<CLIP> The Woman King, Thuso Mbedu: All our lives they, they tell us stories about the Agojie, that you have magic.*

*Viola Davis: Fighting is not magic, it is skill. We will see if you have any.*

LEONARD: What we are not seeing as well is what they became afterwards. After they led the army, you know, they were entrepreneurs, they were religious leaders, they were community leaders and they were mothers, and cultural icons. That's what might be missing a little bit, when you focus solely on violence and war.

NOEL: This kingdom sounds rather remarkable in what it allowed women to become in the 19th century.

LEONARD: Absolutely. And then, for instance, the government of Ghezo were very gender inclusive. Women were not just allowed into the army, were allowed in every level of government.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: There's an interesting moment in the movie where one of the king's wives tells him we have what we have because of the slave trade. Essentially, this is why the kingdom of Dahomey is rich. Is that accurate? Is the slave trade how Dahomey grew into a very wealthy kingdom?

LEONARD: Yes and no. Yes, because, you know, the slave trade for at least a century was a major part of the local economy. But at the same time, particularly under King Ghezo there were aggressive push to diversify the economy by bringing like palm oil, coconuts, bananas, other agricultural products that could be sold internationally, particularly to Europe. And besides that, there was a major conflict within the government over the continuation of the slave trade. On one side there were clear attempts to, if not to end it altogether was actually to scale it down significantly. And we also need to stress the fact that by the time of Ghezo, the process of getting slaves and export them has become less centralized. Something to stress as well is that Dahomey accounted for 5% of overall slave exports, you know, about 600,000 people out of 13 million. So that's big. But, you know, it shows that Dahomey was not the epicenter of African slave trade, you know. So I'm not trying to diminish the importance of slave economy, but I wanted to put in perspective and then be slightly more nuanced by stressing the fact that particularly mid-19th century, there was serious internal conflict about ending the slave trade.

SCORING IN <The Woman King soundtrack: Agojie Training Montage>

NOEL: What do you think is the legacy of these women? What do you think we can learn from them?

LEONARD: Yeah, so, ok, two things. So I think the first thing we learn is that they are ways to overcome a gender gap. And there are two ways. One is belief that there is nothing intrinsically weak about a woman. So they can do anything, including the riskiest and the most challenging job, which is actually: frontline fighter. And, this belief is not enough. You need to set things up – whether it is education policy, job opportunities and laws – to allow them to do exactly that. You know, for instance, well, maybe those women coming in did not have all the attributes to be as a fierce warrior as men. But then through the training, they did exactly that. This is important. It has a lot of implications. For instance, if you have a very gender gap in mathematics, well, you know, set up an all female elite math school, you know, and then before you know, that's it. They are, it’s equal. you know, I mean, so I think this is for me a lesson to be learned. And the second one is that, you know, we have to be open minded and hold the view that great things may have happened outside where we are. People tend to think that Europe brought gender equality in Africa and only to realize that, in fact, Europe was way behind some part of Africa on issues of gender equity, that Europe had a lot to learn even today. We also have a lot to learn today from the past. And I'm very, very happy that the movie came out to show exactly that.

SCORING CROSSFADE WITH <The Woman King soundtrack: untitled track 7>

Leonard Wantchekon at Princeton. He’s working on a book about the Agojie.

Today’s show was produced by Avishay Artsy and fact-checked by Tori Dominguez. It was engineered by Paul Robert Mounsey. Amina Al-Sadi edited the show. It’s Today, Explained. I’m The Other Woman King.

SCORING OUT

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**