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CENTRE STAGE

Centre Stage: Isis Davis

After leaving mainstream education at 13 and entering rehab at 21, sheer tenacity and resilience brought Isis Davis to our screens.

BY VALENTINA WRIGHT

NOVEMBER 18, 2020

It's hard to believe rehab in Gloucestershire was the beginning of it all for Isis Davis. Now, on board the *Killing Eve* writing team and joining Colin Firth and Julie Walters in the 2020 film adaptation of iconic children's tale, *The Secret Garden*, Davis is working harder than ever.

After spending her teens mixed up with a bad crowd, Davis left everyone she knew, rebuilt her life from scratch, and re-educated herself as a mature student. Armed with a handful of qualifications, she then got herself onto a BTEC course in Performing Arts, and subsequently into university.

Unable to afford drama school after being accepted, she wrote a one-woman play and took it to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and London venues. Simultaneously writing her dissertation and working as a cleaner, Davis “didn’t realise how hard it would be”. Using any free time to walk up and down streets promoting the show, her one track mind echoed: “This is what I’m going to do. This is going to work. This is it.”

And it did work. Davis signed with an agent in London and instantly became hot property not just as an actor, but as a writer too. Never imagining it would become her profession, as a child she would write to liberate herself from the reality she was in. For her, “writing was like therapy—whatever was going on, writing was my way of escaping it all.”

She didn’t know it yet, but another world to which she used to escape was going to come back for her. “I loved *The Secret Garden*, I had it on video and used to watch it on repeat.” Her one disconnect was that there was no one who looked like her. “I feel proud that myself and Amir Wilson are the first people of colour to play Martha and Dickon. It’s a dream come true.”

In the film, orphaned yet entitled Mary Lennox (Dixie Egerickx) is audacious and exacting in her treatment of Martha (Davis). Yet, as her servant, Martha can do little but offer subtle life lessons, teaching Mary the resilience and independence that Isis had painstakingly cultivated in her real life. “I tried to put across the Martha that I would have wanted when I was little.”

Davis hopes *The Secret Garden* will inspire kids to get outdoors. In her family, putting tech down and wellies on is how the best days begin. Greenery and diversity were priorities when moving with her wife and kids last year. “I lived in Gloucestershire and it wasn’t diverse at all. I experienced a lot of racism.”

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“I once came into work with my hair out and my supervisor just laughed at me. She laughed so much in front of all the other staff, saying ‘How does it just stay like that?!’ It was so awful. Later, I found out that they used to call me ‘the dark one’ behind my back. I stopped wearing my hair out because I didn’t want the stares.”

Now, Isis wears her hair out every day. Life on the outskirts of London feels closer to her upbringing in Ladbroke Grove, where she participated in Notting Hill Carnival every year, and “Black, white, mixed... we were all one, we all grew up playing together”.

Be under no illusions though, London is not free of racism. In subtler forms, prejudice pervades, and after George Floyd’s murder sparked a reawakening of consciousness about the subject, Isis, like many other people of colour, felt a resurrection of suppressed and traumatic experiences.

“Being mixed race is sometimes difficult because you can struggle with your identity. I was taught that I was Black, and I will always be seen as Black because white people would never see me as white, ever, but Black people will accept me as Black.”

For Isis, the best thing to come from the BLM movement has been the conversations. “People are actively educating themselves and having those awkward conversations. They’re calling things out when they just don’t sit right and organisations are standing up and saying they won’t tolerate it either.”

Unlike Twitter might have you believe, the *Killing Eve* writing room is not somewhere Isis experiences racism. Having faced backlash in June for their all-white writing team, you could be tricked into thinking Isis was an afterthought. In reality, she was due to start back in March, before Covid threw us all into disarray. Re-organised and ready for action, Isis is now fully on board and in awe of the process. “I’ve never known anything like it. The calibre of writers on the show and the work rate is phenomenal.”

As you’ve likely gathered, Isis is not work shy, and part of that is down to her Black upbringing. Previous generations have marched, rioted, and fought for Black rights, but within homes parents had to teach their kids to work twice as hard to survive in an unjust world.

With the BLM movement we’re finally recognising that this is not a Black problem—this is a world problem. This is a problem for all of us. “People want to be allies and stand up, and that’s what feels different this time. Today’s generation, they’re not having it.”

With renewed hope Isis looks forward to better representation on screen, and as her writing career only accelerates we too can get excited about what is to come. Here is a woman who has a way with words and a lot to say, and we’re definitely listening.

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