



***Daughters of the Dust* is a 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that restored film release on dvd.**

12 of a possible 20 points = * = above-average film**

**United States 1991 (2016 restoration) color 113 minutes
live action feature drama Geechee Girls Productions / American Playhouse /
WMG Film Producers: Julie Dash, Pamm Jackson, Arthur Jafa, Steven Jones,
Bernard Nicolas, Floyd Webb a Cohen Media Group dvd release**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Julie Dash**
- 0 Editing: Joseph Burton and Amy Carey**
- 2 Cinematography: Arthur Jafa***
- 2 Lighting: Alex Vlacos***
- 0 Screenplay: Julie Dash**
- 2 Music: John Barnes***
- 2 Production Design: Kerry Marshall***
- Art Direction: Michael Kelly Williams***
- Set Dressing: Ricardo Butler***

Costume Design: Arline Burks Gant*

Makeup: Rose Chatterton

1 Sound

Sound Supervision: Michael Payne

Sound Editing Supervision: Jeremy Hoenack

Sound Effects: Ray Greene and Jerry Trent

Sound Mixing: Veda Campbell and Jeremy Hoenack

Casting: Len Hunt

2 Acting

1 Creativity

12 total points

Cast: Cora Lee Day* (Nana Peazant), Alva Rogers* (Eula Peazant), Barbara O (Yellow Mary), Trula Hoosier (Trula, Yellow Mary's traveling companion), Umar Abdurrahamn (Bilal Muhammad), Cheryl Lynn Bruce* (Viola Peazant), Tommy Redmond Hicks (Mr. Snead, photographer), Marcus Humphrey and Bernard Wilson (boatmen), Adisa Anderson* (Eli Peazant), Eartha Robinson (Myown Peazant), Bahni Turpin* (Iona Peazant), Jabario Cuthbert (j) (Ninnyjugs), Yolanda Simmons and Ebony Hills (teenage girls), Sherry Jackson (older cousin), Cornell Royal (Daddy Mac), Tony King (newlywed man), Laing Althea (newlywed woman), Vertamae Grosvenor (hairbraider), Catherine Tarver (woman with baby), Jasmine Lee (j) and Dalisia Robinson (j) (Peazant babies), Willie Faulkner, Joe Taylor, Frank Brown, and Rueben Fripp (Peazant men), Kaycee Moore* (Haagar Peazant), Derrick Coaxum (j) and Neil Howard (j) (Peazant boys), Jared Warren (j), Zenovia Green (j), Taira Miller (j), and Tiffanye Hills (j) (Peazant children), Jamar Freeman (j) (Pete), Detrell Freeman (j) (Re-Pete), Vivian Dawson and Inez Griffin (rice huskers), Kai-Lynn Warren (j) (the unborn child), Geraldine Dunston (Viola's mother), M. Cochise Anderson (St. Julien Lastchild), Darrell O'Cook and Julius Cook (moss gatherers), Ervin Green (Baptist minister), Benjamin Gillens (minister's assistant), Marie Smalls (woman being baptized), Ronald Daise, De Witt Parker, Lonnie Moon, Emma Robinson, Taylor Thompson, Virginia Green, Maceo Griffin, Archie Thomas, Raymond Paige, Ervena Faulkner, J. R. Wilson, and Wilhelmina Wilson (baptismal procession members),

Tarell Brown, Shanna Parker, Belle White, Stanley White, Maxine Royale, Georgia Wiggins, Carolyn Garris, Ella Powell, Bernice Jenkins, Lillian Johnson, and Jackie Parker (indigo plantation workers), Sharria Johnson (young Nana Peazant), Leroy Simmons Jr. (young Daddy Mac), Leroy Simmons (Shad Peazant)

Though gorgeous to look at, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* suffers from a parochial viewpoint necessitating considerable explanation via audio commentary bonus. A truly milestone motion picture doesn't require protracted verbal interpretation. Its visuals alone will communicate the fundamental dramatic story. This is sadly not the case here.

Set in Ibo Landing, Georgia in 1902 at a Peazant family reunion / farewell ceremony, the film focuses on the history of that clan from its ancestral arrival there in 1803 to the second year of the twentieth century. Its oldest living female is Nana Peazant, who was born around 1814 into ante-bellum plantation slavery and lived through the American Civil War and Emancipation. Since the family's home island of St. Simons had been overrun by Union troops in February, 1862, its enslaved inhabitants obtained freedom in January, 1863, the month of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. If Viola wasn't born until 1867, that would be the fourth year of freedom for the island's blacks. Not the second as her bassinet inscription indicates.

According to local historical records, a group of seventy-five West Africans unloaded in Savannah, Georgia in 1803 were sold as slaves to Sea Island plantation owners for the price of \$100 each. Herded onto a smaller vessel for transport east, they somehow successfully rebelled against its crew, took command of the ship, and dispatched sailors into the Atlantic. When the *Monrovia* (or *York*) ran aground, the Africans disembarked and about a dozen of them were observed to commit suicide, walking in chains to a watery demise at Dawson Creek to the west. Survivors included Peazant family ancestors, who worked initially creating indigo dye. Later they subsisted by planting first rice and then cotton for export.

These old times accounts are narrated mainly by Nana, who preserves a mix of pre-Christian customs passed along by storytelling elders and local superstitions at least partly founded on Native American folklore. She lives

mainly in the past, is insistent her grandchildren and great-grandchildren respect and cherish ancestral traditions.

Opposed to that are two other members of the extended clan: granddaughter-in-law Haagar, an outspoken Christian widow obsessed with bettering the social and financial status of her family, and prudish Christian convert Viola, the citified granddaughter of Nana's, someone who warmly embraces this current clan meeting as an ideal opportunity for missionary evangelism to "heathen" island youths and Afrocentric adult conservatives.

Owing more than a little to Peter Weir's exquisite Valentine's Day mystery *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, set three years earlier at the nineteenth century's tail end and also revolving around a picnic with highly dramatic consequences, Dash's film moves at a similarly slow, mystical pace, employing whiteouts as transitions between scenes. Both films investigate and privilege feminine sensibilities. Each suggests background violence and sexual violation.

Like adolescent schoolgirls of *PAHR* seeking liberation from constricting social custom through exploration of nature and discovery of artefacts from a more primitive culture, Eula and Iona Peazant are in revolt against progressive adaptations championed by Eula's spouse Eli and Iona's mother Haagar.

Eula, perhaps drowning in guilt over being perceived as somehow unfaithful to her husband, shies away from traveling permanently to the mainland. Past trauma overwhelms her. In despair, she chooses to stay with ancestral "spirits" feeling greater kinship with them than with unviolated peers still able to romanticize what will be found "up north."

Iona shares Native American St. Julien Lastchild's unseverable bond with nature. She accepts both his individualism and his escapism, preferring stability of traditional ways to unpredictable futures. However, her espousal of romantic love cuts sharply against Native American and African bridal arrangements, as does St. Julien's refusal to seek approval for marriage from his lover's mother. The pair are actually as much outsiders philosophically as Yellow Mary and Trula.

Yellow Mary, cousin to Viola, has a complicated backstory. Narrative clues about why she left her island birthplace to begin with are muddled, to say the least. Young, unmarried, and pregnant, this exploited adolescent soon has a stillborn child to bury on the mainland. Presumably returning to Ibo Landing or thereabouts, she's hired by a white family to wet nurse their infant. When her

employer relocates to Cuba she accompanies him there where she is sexually abused. Deciding that was more than enough to tolerate, she refused to continue operating as designated wet nurse to white infants, supporting herself afterwards through prostitution. At some later date she befriended Trula, perhaps a younger brothel worker whom she mentored. The pair are on their way to Nova Scotia, convinced only there they might shed criminal pasts and ignominious reputations to live in freedom. Mary regards herself as completely independent. But she feels a loneliness which eventually compels her to reconnect with Gullah relatives. Others may seek better lives elsewhere. She's gone that route and found results unsatisfying.

Obtaining compassion, forgiveness, and acceptance from Eula and Nana, she decides to remain on native soil.

So Trula, defiantly challenging censure against women smoking and climbing trees, must ultimately travel to Nova Scotia alone. Unrelated to "backwater" Peazants, she observes them with condescension, unwilling or unable to enter into their amusements or African rites. Kaleidoscope and slide viewer intrigue momentarily, as they do the islanders, but nothing holds her attention for very long. She embodies a restlessness more akin to that of white American pioneers, a need to be always journeying, looking for Paradise on earth, running away from lifestyles and folkways of forerunners.

One of the underdeveloped and least credible characters in the film is Eula's husband Eli. At times a borderline vengeful madman, he can also become a loving helpmate or affectionate grandson. Supporter of anti-lynching laws to protect fellow blacks, Eli's quite ready to recast himself as combination judge and hangman should Eula reveal the identity of her assaulter. One hour he's resolved to leave the island, at least for a while. Less than a day later this weathercock is quite content to allow Eula and Nana to change his mind. Why this sudden shift in outlook?

Perhaps the most interesting of residents here is Bilal Muhammad, who comes from the French West Indies but for unknown reasons is regarded by other islanders as a West African. Bilal claims to have witnessed the suicide walk of rebellious Igbos. Which would mean he must be more than one hundred years old. Making him, and not Nana, the oldest living inhabitant of St. Simons Island. He's a devout Muslim with a copy of the Koran printed in Arabic, a language he would not be able to read. His prayer recitations must derive from

memory and oral instruction, possibly from a father or uncle. Bilal is also an outsider, though not so thoroughly as photographer Snead.

Mr. Snead has been brought to the scene by Viola to record for posterity the final family feast of the Peazants. A resident of Philadelphia, he's urbane, good-humored, tolerant, scientific, a firm believer in progress and objectivity. In his opinion, the black race is headed for a more prosperous tomorrow, free and unencumbered by outdated and outmoded cultural relics. He's possessed of a folklorist's insatiable thirst for acquiring antiquarian tales and preserved talismans, sort of a Don Quixote or Sir Walter Scott in Afro-American guise. His medium, however, is not the written word. It's rather the optical image. Like his girlfriend and client Viola, he's bent on self-improvement, enlightenment, and assimilation into the mainstream of American religious, educational, and mechanical practices.

Viewers are treated to fairly cursory inspection of these disparate lives at that critical juncture when each Dataw Islander must decide whether to stay or move. Arguments are provided to support each outcome. A definite slant towards the former is created by the Unborn Child's intrusive epilogue narration. That's coupled with scenes of domestic bliss featuring the girl running along the shoreline behind her parents, Eula and Eli. Nana's peaceful death is recounted, not shown.

Most telling is a climactic scene where Nana verbally compels those departing to take along a Bible with attached lock of her hair to symbolize transmission of the past into the future. She's informing the others tomorrow is built on yesterday.

Audiences may or may not agree with this. The United States has been constructed mostly by rejecting, discarding, ignoring, or redefining history and tradition.

Alex Vlacos triumphantly takes top honors for his achievement in optimal capture of natural light. Partnered with Arthur Jafa's superb cinematography, making the most of subtropical coastal scenery, a procession of Impressionistic pastel scenes provide a radiant, nearly Arcadian exquisiteness to this drama. Dazzling whites, rich buttery yellows, and oceanic aquamarines predominate effectively.

While heavy on linguistic accuracy, director Dash's screenplay fails to reveal much in the way of character motivations. Not enough time is devoted to

showing preliminary experiences of people and how they've impacted on present behaviors and beliefs. That's a job for flashbacks, not voiceovers.

Editing, which could have been used to build suspense, too frequently drags. Scenes and leads hop about without any compelling structure, too randomly and lacking either thematic or chronological continuity.

More successful is the score of John Barnes, consistently creating an African ambience appropriate to the time and place of this story. His synclavier passages reverberate in much the same manner as the pan flute underscoring of Bruce Smeaton for *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

Kerry Marshall's production design, color schemes of art director Michael Kelly Williams and fascinatingly detailed newspaper-covered walls of Ricardo Butler's sets all contribute helpfully in recreating a prime Roosevelt-era atmosphere.

Sound recording is adequate most of the time. Miking amateurs optimally presents quite a challenge.

Among performers, standouts are Cora Lee Day's aggressively orthodox octogenarian Nana Peazant, Cheryl Lynn Bruce's soul-saving, kind-hearted Viola Peazant, and Adisa Anderson's conflicted, muscular Eli Peazant, torn between discordant demands of justice and love. Also noteworthy is Kaycee Moore's grimly unpardoning and possessive Haagar Peazant, a woman incapable of showing maternal love until it's too late to make a positive difference, and Bahni Turpin's enchantingly adoring Iona Peazant, disobedient daughter and reckless Romantic.

Special features on this restored version dvd of *Daughters of the Dust* are a trailer with runtime of one minute, thirty-five seconds and an audio commentary clarifying what the bottle tree represents, Gullah child-naming practices, details of Sea Island culinary favorites, and significances of floating figurehead, bassinette, and indigo "hands." Director Dash also discusses the film's production timeline, influences, and borrowings from historical documents, period photos, and family remembrances.

Rated PG-13 by the MPAA and TV-PG, this film is decidedly more appropriate for exclusively adult audiences, as it includes extended discussions of sexual conduct and misconduct, an auditory description of mass suicide, and a seriocomic tussle between two adult male cousins. It offers substantive insight into Black History, generational conflict, female empowerment or lack thereof,

and Sea Island culture. *Daughters of the Dust* should be recommended chiefly for visual beauty and as a kind of primer about Gullah food, lifestyles, dialect, and history.