

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
December 2018

Widows (dir. Steve McQueen, 2018)

On Camera

Veronica Rawlings: Viola Davis: An Oscar winner, Emmy winner, and two-time Tony winner
Linda: Michelle Rodriguez: Potent breakthrough in *Girlfight* (00); *Lost* (TV 05-10)
Alice: Elizabeth Debicki: Jordan in *The Great Gatsby* (13); HBO's *The Tale* (18)
Belle: Cynthia Erivo: Won a Tony leading the musical of *The Color Purple* (16)
Jack Mulligan: Colin Farrell: the star of the entire group's favorite film, *The Lobster* (15)
Tom Mulligan: Robert Duvall: 87! Recently became the oldest-ever male Oscar nominee
Jamal Manning: Brian Tyree Henry: superb in a small part in *If Beale Street Could Talk* (18)
Jatemme Manning: Daniel Kaluuya: the lead in *Get Out* (17); glowering in *Black Panther* (18)
Harry Rawlings: Liam Neeson: his signature work in *Schindler's List* (93) is back in cinemas
Amanda, a widow: Carrie Coon: Steppenwolf ensemble; *Fargo* (TV 17); *The Leftovers* (TV 14-17)
Alice's mother: Jacki Weaver: two-time Oscar nominee! *Silver Linings Playbook* (12)
Alice's "boyfriend": Lukas Haas: the little boy in *Witness* (85); an astronaut in *First Man* (18)
Bash, the driver: Garret Dillahunt: Tommy Lee's sidekick in *No Country for Old Men* (07)
Brechelle, stylist: Adepero Oduye: key supporting role in McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (13)

Off Camera

Director: Steve McQueen: No, not that one; filmmaker who started as a gallery artist
Co-Screenwriter: Gillian Flynn: Novelist behind *Gone Girl* (14) and *Sharp Objects* (TV 18)
Cinematography: Sean Bobbitt: underrated gems: *Wonderland* (99); *Queen of Katwe* (16)
Film Editing: Joe Walker: complex cross-cutting in *Arrival* (16), *Blade Runner 2049* (17)
Original Score: Hans Zimmer: Everything from *The Lion King* (94) to *Dunkirk* (17)
Production Design: Adam Stockhausen: Everything from slave plantations to *Isle of Dogs* (18)
Costume Design: Jenny Eagan: recent western *Hostiles* (17); Netflix's *Beasts of No Nation* (15)

Other films directed by Steve McQueen...

Hunger (2008) – This sober, fact-based drama about the hunger strike that Irish activist Bobby Sands undertook in a UK prison introduced the world to McQueen and to Michael Fassbender

Shame (2011) – McQueen and Fassbender both took unexpected swerves with this contemporary drama about a sex addict in New York City, in swank apartments that look a lot like Viola's

12 Years a Slave (2013) – This adaptation of Solomon Northup's memoir exposed McQueen's work to wider audiences but did not make him an obvious candidate for pop films like *Widows*

Some more good movies that overlap with *Widows*...

Widows (1983) – A six-part miniseries from British television, starring three white women and a black acquaintance; McQueen saw the series at 13 and has wanted to remake it for years

Bound (1996) – Another Chicago-set thriller about women outwitting male gangsters who don't see them coming; Gina Gershon and Jennifer Tilly get the money *and* the girl (i.e., each other)

Dirty Pretty Things (2002) – An early hit for *12 Years a Slave*'s Chiwetel Ejiofor, Oscar-nominated for its script, in which a multiracial group of hotel workers must stop a crime ring in their midst

The Town (2010) – Ben Affleck's box-office hit about a gang of Boston bank robbers moved back and forth between nuanced character work and violent action scenes, much like *Widows* does

Gone Girl (2014) – Our second film, already four years ago! Gillian Flynn's trademark knacks for complicated women and shocking narrative twists made a big splash in this perverse thriller

Roman J. Israel, Esq. (2017) – Denzel Washington richly earned his Best Actor nomination last year for a story that combines thriller dimensions, character study, and current cultural critique

Destroyer (2018) – Another female-led cops-and-mobsters thriller you may want to investigate later this season, with an unrecognizable Nicole Kidman as a policewoman haunted by her past

Facts about *Widows* you may appreciate...

Widows author Lynda La Plante also wrote the *Prime Suspect* TV series that made Helen Mirren a household name in the U.S. McQueen had the idea to move the story to Chicago after having major solo shows at the MCA in the 1990s and the Art Institute in 2012. He recruited as his co-writer Gillian Flynn, a Kansas City native who made her home here after leaving her position at *Entertainment Weekly* in 2008. The project marks McQueen's first foray into a commercial genre and Flynn's first attempt at adapting someone else's work on screen. They took several joint meetings with local activists, ex-cons, law professors, and others to really capture the city.

McQueen also felt drawn to the way Chicago's proximate but segregated neighborhoods made it possible to tell a story in which huge inequalities exist in dramatic contrast, and in which women could be linked through so many mutual acquaintances and still never have met.

McQueen cast actresses against their usual treatment on screen. He was aware of giving Davis more self-determination and sexual life than movies usually afford her. Moreover, he wanted her to run with the challenge of playing someone not initially written as black. He wanted to coax more vulnerability from Rodriguez, who usually plays rough characters in ensembles of men. He wanted to accentuate Debicki's extraordinary height and unique physicality, which other directors have tried to disguise. And he wanted to give Erivo a non-singing showcase.

Rodriguez, in particular, was so unnerved by her challenge that she repeatedly rejected the offer, admitting in interviews that she was terrified of playing someone "weak" or subservient. She associated her character of Linda with women in the communities where she grew up, who married and had children early and lived under the thumb of indifferent men of or domestic responsibilities that afforded them no voice. "I've always hated these women," Rodriguez has subsequently testified. "This movie allowed me to see my mother in a light I never did before."

Elizabeth Debicki is Australian and was raised in Paris by her ballet-dancing parents, including her Polish-born father. She attests that her exposure to patriarchal behaviors on her father's side of the family gave her unique access to that side of her character that believes she has to go along.

Viola Davis confessed in interviews before *Widows* opened that, having never been the lead in a big studio film—Emma Stone was the central figure in *The Help*—she was at risk of taking it personally if this one under-performed. Indeed, the box-office has not been stellar. It is unclear if the marketing campaign didn't work, or if audiences resisted the cast or the premise, or what.

Differences from the original British miniseries...

In Lynda La Plante's version, all four of the women belonged to England's working class, by birth and by accent if not by current circumstance. McQueen wanted to construct his team as more of a socioeconomic spread, from Veronica who lives in luxury (albeit precariously) to Linda who is a small business-owner (albeit precariously), to Alice who travels in wealthy circles but only by selling herself, to Belle who has no social or economic capital whatsoever. In this way, *Widows* obligates its women to cross-class as well as cross-racial collaboration. In the eyes of McQueen and Flynn, this facet of their script also addresses Chicago's deep class inequities.

1983's *Widows* featured no electoral plot whatsoever. The rival groups of men putting pressure on the original Veronica (called Dolly in the series, and played by Ann Mitchell, who has a non-speaking role as Carrie Coon's mother at her husband's funeral) were a group of police who had been trying for years to nab her husband plus a rival team of gangsters who wanted to seize Harry's connections, money, and amassed underworld secrets. The series implicitly indicts Thatcher's England, where no social safety net will catch these women who now have no income, but there is nothing like the direct critique of institutional politics that this version has.

Dolly, the original Veronica, learns fairly early in the six-hour series that only three of the four men's bodies turned up in the ashy aftermath of the getaway explosion. Nobody thinks Harry is the person who escaped, especially given that she buried his body at a funeral... but, to buy herself time for her scheme to complete the heist *and* to take the heat off her for having his old notebooks, she invents and spreads a rumor that Harry might still be alive. The cops *and* the mobsters thus spend time looking for Harry when they could be paying more attention to her. The revelation that Harry actually *is* still alive is a shock to Dolly, revealed just as it is in the film. However, in the series, she never actually sees Harry again, only senses him through that door and spots a telltale belonging. He is later killed by cops, amid their follow-up to the heist.

Shirley, the "Alice" character, lives off-and-on with her mother, who works as a produce-seller but also moonlights in exotic dancing and sex work. It is very clear where Shirley's life could lead.

All three of the original "widows" in the miniseries are white. Only Belle/Bella is black, and she works as a stripper in the basement of an arcade and nightclub where Linda (the parallel figure for Michelle Rodriguez's character) works selling tickets. Without the script spelling this out, Bella thus has the task *and* the satisfaction of proving her mettle to three white women who may have underestimated her. The dynamic is obviously different in *Widows*, though the cast and the filmmakers in the new version agreed that Veronica and Belle should have no easy affinity, and maybe even a quick dislike for each other, given their divergent stations.

Broad conversation topics...

Director's Statement: This [quote](#) that captures McQueen's sense of the film's thematic content and its contemporary relevance has already become rather famous: "This is how the fabric of America developed: People from all different parts of the world come together to create the union, and these women know that they can't do without each other. So they come together to do something, to achieve their goal, and they know they can only do this by being together. That is America, as far as I'm concerned. So the fact that we have a situation with someone who is trying to undermine that, pull that apart—you can't pull apart the fabric of the country. I suppose for me the movie is about realizing that we do have power. American can-do. I'm not suggesting we should go out there and just rob people. What I'm suggesting is that people should sort of think about one another in order to take power. This is what these women from different social and ethnic backgrounds are doing." The "we" here is kind of interesting, since McQueen is a black British man, but do you agree with him about the story's currency for today? What about his argument that *Widows*, in its dark way, actually stresses what's *best* about America: a legacy of uniting and collaborating across divisions?

Local Landmarks: Veronica's apartment in one of the Mies van der Rohe buildings is only a few blocks from where we convene our sessions! And many of us may have experienced in Hyde Park or in other neighborhoods inside or just beyond the city the remarkable proximity of super-gentrified and deeply under-resourced communities. Did your awareness of Chicago or even your identification of specific sites deepen your experience of following the story?

The Political Subplots: You might have noticed that Jack Mulligan and Jamal Manning, the two candidates for Alderman of the 18th Ward, have the same initials, in addition to being linked to some of the same criminal elements and courting the same donors. To some, the film suggests that there is "no difference" between the dynastic white candidate who barely lives in the district and the grassroots black challenger who outsources some dirty deeds to others on his team but conducts some himself. Did this strike you as an important statement about power and corruption in Chicago, or as a cynical, leveling dismissal of *all* politics being contaminated? What signs of actual or potential redemption did you observe in each man?

Camerawork: McQueen is justly celebrated for his strong visual ideas and for the ways in which his "eye" as a gallery artist has transferred to film. ([This article](#) about how McQueen, his cinematographer, and their color grader modulate the look of individual shots fascinated me.) It may surprise people, then, to learn that he does not usually pre-compose his shots in his head until he shows up to set and observes the actors' choices in rehearsal. For instance, he only decided to capture the scene of the execution in the gymnasium after seeing how close Daniel Kaluuya got to the two men he ultimately shoots, and thus decided to amplify that sense of "encircling" them with his camera. When did you most notice the camera or the filmmaking in general in *Widows*? Did its behavior distract you, or serve the story?

Conclusion: The original miniseries ends as all four women have fled England for Brazil, where they will be hard to track and, one hopes, impossible to extradite... though there was a second season two years later, so they must have gotten up to something! What did you think of this movie's epilogue in the diner and of the final shot in particular, as Veronica tries to make nice?

Specific touches worth contemplating...

Editing: The first thing we see in *Widows*—and this itself is a huge challenge to studio convention—is a passionate close-up kiss between Viola Davis and Liam Neeson in bed, which abruptly cuts to the shaky, ballistics-heavy chaos of the botched robbery. The opening sequence keeps cross-cutting between the women’s “normal” lives at this moment (including Linda running her store, and Alice testing her limits with her abusive partner) and the explosive action. In a way, this is narratively efficient, launching us into several plot-strands at once and emphasizing the before-and-after contrast of how much these women’s lives are about to change. But the editing also suggests an *overlap* between these scenes. Whatever they do or don’t know, these women’s “normal” lives, privileged or not, are premised on this level of violence and crime.

Violence: On that theme, I had an interesting conversation with a film critic I admire, Michael Koresky, who felt dismayed early on that McQueen seemed to pass so quickly from cogently critiquing violence around the world and across time in *Hunger* and *12 Years a Slave* to rather gleefully perpetrating it here. That van doesn’t just blow up at the end of the prologue, it *really* blows up. Later, though, we learn some information that explains why the fireball and the booming wreckage were even more hyperbolic than they needed to be. In general, did you find *Widows* to be thoughtful and critical about violence, dangerously indulgent of it, or both?

Production Design: When Veronica goes to her front door, unwittingly admitting Jamal Manning who’s there to threaten her (and her dog!), she is too short to see easily through the peephole that’s ostensibly a security measure. I love this touch, because it suggests that this apartment was always the home of her giant husband, and less so her own. I did still harbor questions, though, about how much Veronica did or didn’t know about Harry’s dealings, particularly given the uniform luxury of her belongings and surroundings. Was this an issue for you?

Costumes: On the same point, I was struck by how Veronica, a lobbyist for the Teacher’s Union, only seems to have sleek, high-end outfits, which repeatedly make her look out-of-place: for example, when she explores the criminals’ hideout for the first time in her designer indigo trench coat, or when she wears a boldly geometrical black-and-white top in an expensive fabric for her meeting with Carrie Coon’s Amanda in a modest diner. On one hand, her clothes keep reiterating that she isn’t cut out for any of this—or for easy rapport with the other women in her makeshift crew, who don’t live like she does. On the other, they suggest the pressure she eventually admits to perform a level of financial security she actually lacks (which makes the choice to meet Linda and Alice naked in that steam room at the Waldorf more interesting).

Sound: As Daniel Kaluuya’s Jatemme tracks Viola Davis’s Veronica to the bowling alley, he listens to a radio program about Albert Woodfox, a former Black Panther and member of the [Angola Three](#), whose legacy is a complex mix of violent crime, dubious prosecution, and excessive punishment, including the longest period of solitary confinement in U.S. history. The uneasy collisions of culpability and principle, criminality and injustice in Woodfox’s story are interesting in relation to Jatemme and Jamal, who seem sincere in wanting something better for their community but have resorted to indefensible means toward those ends. (It’s also a bit of an in-joke about Kaluuya, who had already filmed his performance in *Black Panther*.)

Editing: Editor Joe Walker has many plot-strands to balance in *Widows*, but his cuts are motivated by thematic as well as story-based logics. One witty example is when he cuts directly from shots of the DesiresforHire.com website that Alice's mother is showing to her, urging her own daughter into sex work, to Jack Mulligan's rally on behalf of MWOW: Minority Women-Owned Work, an organization he claims to support but in which he shows no real interest, beyond saying what he must to secure their votes. Sexual prostitution → political prostitution.

Gender: “You're Harry's wife?” Linda asks upon first meeting Veronica at the sauna. She is clearly unprepared for Harry to be married to a black woman. Veronica, unable to conjure up a response, simply gives her an annoyed blink. First off, maybe these gangsters really *didn't* say much about their exploits or colleagues to their wives, since Linda clearly doesn't know about how Harry and Veronica lost their son—an incident that turns entirely on Harry having a black wife and a mixed-race child. Furthermore, as much as *Widows* drives home how chronically men underestimate these women, it never loses sight of how these women judge, stereotype, or underestimate each other, too. Everyone internalizes the very biases under which they suffer. (That said, there are plenty of peripheral scenes where women help other women only for that reason, as when the Latina secretary at the architecture firm slips Linda some privileged info, or when the stranger at the gun show helps Alice buy three Glocks, at her daughter's urging.)

Production Design: The alderman election does not transpire (offscreen) until the movie's final sequences, but already by the middle, as Jamal encourages Jatemme to press harder into the whereabouts of the money Harry stole, the “JAMAL MANNING for ALDERMAN” posters are already peeling off the walls of their headquarters, hanging in tatters in Jamal's own office. This is a campaign that is taking desperate measures to win, while acting like it's already lost.

Production Design: When Marcus gets shot by the cop in his father's car, he is parked next to a wall covered with Shepard Fairey's iconic Obama “Hope” posters. We've already seen Marcus drive past this wall as he talks to Harry on the phone, so the scene has made doubly share we notice that backdrop—an important symbol of political optimism that did not produce the level of change that many people wanted to see, including or even especially around Chicago. (This scene's soundtrack, incidentally, features high, mournful strings throughout, even before its tragic turn; as with the bedraggled posters at Manning headquarters, *Widows* often sees defeat coming.) Lest we get too disillusioned, however, it matters to note that the only character who sees *no* hope for change, ever, is Robert Duvall's. We're surely not meant to agree with *him*?

Costumes: As Alice declines David's offer (command?) that she join him in Shanghai, she wears a knitwear top whose open, low-cut collar is fastened with a long thread of gold chain-link. The costume makes its own case that she is on the precipice of spending her life in glittering shackles, imprisoned by someone else's money. But also: where did she acquire this top?

Sound and Editing: There are plot reasons why the heist transpires on the night of the Alderman candidates' debate: the month Jamal allows Veronica to pay him back will end soon, and the Mulligan headquarters are largely deserted. But, just as the prologue used cross-cuts to link the lives of luxury, sexual fulfillment, and small-business ownership with Faustian compromise, the cuts and soundtrack in this sequence juxtapose the *literal* heist of hijacking the impounded money to the *symbolic, political* heist of two corrupt candidates duking it out for local power.