



10^e FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DU FILM DE LA ROCHE-SUR-YON

POUR ABORDER LE FILM
EN ANGLAIS

CLEMENCY CHINONYE CHUKWU



Synopsis

Des années d'exécutions dans le quartier des condamnés à mort ont eu des conséquences néfastes pour la surveillante de la prison, Bernadine Williams. Alors qu'elle se prépare à exécuter un autre détenu, Bernadine doit faire face aux démons psychologiques et émotionnels créés par son travail, la connectant finalement à l'homme qu'elle est condamnée à tuer.

Vocabulary

Movie vocabulary

Filmmaker / Director : *Réalisateur*
To launch a film career : *Lancer la carrière d'un acteur*
Character : *Personnage*
To screen : *Projeter / Screening : Projection*
Screen : *Écran*

Prison vocabulary

Death row : *Couloir de la mort*
Maximum security prison (aussi surnommé max) : *Prison à sécurité maximale*
Capital punishment : *Peine capitale*
Wardens : *Gardien*
Inmate : *Prisonnier*
Hearing : *Audience (au tribunal)*
Lawyer : *Avocat*
Conviction : *Condamnation*
To request for clemency / To seek clemency : *demander grâce*

General vocabulary from the article

To depict : *Dépeindre / Décrire / Illustrer*
Brimming with enthusiasm : *Déborder / Être rempli d'enthousiasme*
Staff : *Équipe*
To convey : *Transmettre*
Toll : *Prix / Péage*
Plagued by something : *Rongé par quelque chose*
To struggle : *lutter contre*
sparked : *Suscité / Provoqué*
botched : *Bâclé / Raté*
To stem : *Endiguer / Enrayer / Arrêter*

Connecting word

Despite : *Malgré*

Clemency Director Chinonye Chukwu on Her Sundance Film About Death Row
“There’s so much dehumanization that has to happen in order to perpetuate the system,” says Chukwu about capital punishment as depicted in her film, which stars Alfre Woodard as a prison warden.

BY NICOLE SPERLING

Vanity Fair, January 28, 2019

When *Clemency* bows Sunday evening at the Sundance Film Festival, the buzzy film will mark the culmination of an eight-year odyssey for the film’s writer-director, Chinonye Chukwu. Set in a maximum-security prison, the film centers on dutiful prison warden Bernadine Williams (Alfre Woodard) and her struggle to maintain her humanity while she carries out executions in an unnamed U.S. state where capital punishment is legal. It’s a journey that took Chukwu, a Nigerian-born, Alaskan-raised filmmaker, deep into the prison system, where she volunteered on clemency cases, met with wardens and lawyers and death-row inmates, and tried to understand the system from the inside out.

All of it was sparked by Troy Davis, a Georgian man who, despite maintaining his innocence for 20 years, serious doubts about his conviction, and appeals from world figures such as former president Jimmy Carter and Pope Benedict XVI, was executed back in 2011.

From the morning after Troy Davis was executed, I asked myself, if so many of us were navigating these complex emotions surrounding his execution—frustration, anger, sadness—what must it be like for the people whose livelihoods are tied to taking human life?” said Chukwu, who, having just arrived at the Sundance Film Festival, was brimming with enthusiasm. “I knew at that moment I really wanted to explore the emotional and psychological complexities of the prison staff, particularly a warden.” In 2013, she began her research process. While teaching film at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, Chukwu volunteered on a woman’s clemency case, shot video testimonies that would be used in hearings, and created a film program for female inmates.

“I felt like, if I’m going to tell a story that is representing an incarcerated population, I was personally obligated to give of myself in some way to that very population,” she said. “That is one of the reasons why I volunteered on this clemency case. It also helped me get very up close and personal to the toll it took on all of the people involved—family, friends, lawyers.”

The result is a story we rarely see in film, that of a warden who is plagued by the prison’s most recent execution—a botched attempt that caused the inmate severe pain before killing him—but is still required to prepare her staff and an inmate (Aldis Hodge) for the next one, her 13th. Meanwhile, the inmate’s lawyer (Richard Schiff) fights to keep him alive, and her husband (Wendell Pierce) tries desperately to reconnect with her.

The weight of Woodard’s character’s steps, her inability to sleep, her nightmares, her isolation from her husband, all stem from the research Chukwu did into the criminal justice system and the impact it has on everyone involved.

“In several of the corrections staff that I spoke with, there’s this kind of heaviness in them because of the work that they were continuously doing. And they didn’t know where to place those feelings,” Chukwu said. “So they would just keep suppressing and suppressing and suppressing, and when I would come and talk with them about it, for some people, that was the first time they actually talked about those things.”

Chukwu enlisted the help of Dr. Allen Ault, a former warden in Georgia, to come to the set and block the execution scenes for the actors and the crew. Chukwu also handed over her script to many of the people she interviewed, requesting they verify the accuracy of the execution process.

One scene in particular—where Woodard’s character is explaining to Hodge’s Anthony Woods how the execution would be conducted—was troubling to many parties involved. “The person who read the script. . . . crossed a lot of the words out,” said Chukwu. “This is too personal. You don’t say, when you die, this will happen. You say, when the procedure is complete.’ It is a procedure. You are detached. Nobody is doing anybody to somebody. This is just protocol. That just threw me. There’s so much dehumanization that has to happen in order to perpetuate the system. And everybody becomes adversely impacted—everybody.”

There is a lightness and brightness to Chukwu that belies the dark material she is conveying on-screen. She attributes her smile and cheery outlook to her years of teaching film, a pathway she pursued while trying to launch her film career. (Her first movie, *Alaskaland*, debuted at some film festivals in 2012 and years later was picked up for digital distribution on platforms like iTunes and Vudu.)

