

Who: Viola Davis

What: Actress, *State of Play*

Where: Santa Anita Park

It's still early, just after 11 a.m., and torrential downpours have kept the Santa Anita Park crowds at a minimum. Even the horses are bowing out; a loudspeaker announces one scratch after another. At FrontRunner, the sprawling casino-style restaurant cantilevered over the grandstand, die-hard optimists settle onto stools at a long bar positioned within easy reach of electronic betting machines. Nobody notices Viola Davis as she walks through the room, wearing jeans, clunky boots, and a parka over a letterman jacket. She's not that kind of actress. But she's taking everything in. >>



"It's interesting to see the type of people who come to the racetrack," she says. "It's the same style of people who go to the casinos and the bingo. I grew up with all that."

Davis's father was a horse groomer at Rhode Island's Narragansett Trotting Park and Lincoln Downs for 25 years. "He'd bring us to the stables," she says. "I loved it—the smell of the horse manure and the food and the vitamins and the hay. All that stuff would stick to the bottom of his shoes, and after he got home it would be caked over everything. It was fantastic!" It wasn't until Dan Davis was dying of cancer two years ago that Viola found out he hadn't enjoyed his work. "He hated it," she says. "I think he thought it was slave labor."

Seated at a window table, Davis describes the whirlwind that has been her life of late: Golden Globe, SAG, and Oscar nominations for her performance in *Doubt*; a stylist to pick out gowns for the succession of red carpets; media attention galore; and correspondence from her rival in the 1972 Miss Central Falls talent contest. The event was held at the recreation center in the predominantly white and Catholic town where Davis, who is neither, grew up. "The note said, 'I think I was in the competition the same year you were!'" Davis recounts dryly. "I realized, 'Yeah, you remember because you won.'" Davis exhales with a light chuckle. "She was pretty and blond and a cheerleader."

Viola Davis is too strong to be dismissed as "pretty," and her eyes indicate a familiarity with hardship that's sometimes evident even when she smiles. Her single scene in *Doubt* may have been last year's most potent movie performance. Wearing a coat that got lost somewhere between yellow and orange and a matching pillbox hat, she squares off against Meryl Streep's formidable Sister Aloysius. Davis's staid ferocity and unlikely stance regarding the nature of her son's relationship with a priest reflect a character who has been dealt a lousy hand and an actress astutely attuned to her despair.

She credits her childhood with providing the experiences that would later inform her work. "There's poor, and there's po,'" she elucidates. "Po' is one step lower. We were po.'" At one point her family lived in an apartment on the third floor of a condemned building. "It had no plumbing," she says. "We didn't have any hot water to begin with, and when the pipes froze, we didn't have any water at all. No phone." The home was outfitted with St. Vincent de Paul secondhand furniture and frequented by rats who chewed on the toys. When she talks about wrapping sheets around her neck at night and covering her head to avoid being bitten, Davis's eyes wander around the restaurant, out the window



MOTHER SUPERIOR: Viola Davis in *Doubt*

to the newly churned dirt of the wet track below, back to the table. Her hands, which are delicate, pull at the throat of her pine-colored turtleneck. "We called my sister Anita 'the Rat Catcher,'" she says. "We had a red plastic baseball bat, and she could kill a rat with one fell swoop. Pow! Flatten it. She was amazing."

Her mother, Mae Alice, was an outspoken champion of welfare reform in Central Falls. "She had an eighth-grade education," Davis says. "She thought that even poor women wanted something better, a life beyond assistance. She was arrested a couple of times. We went to jail a couple of times. My mother always laughs: 'It wasn't jail, Viola. It wasn't jail. We were just in a holding cell for a day.' My dad would come get us out." Davis talks about her past with a trace of pride. She didn't get the e-ticket ride to her gilded interlude of Oscar love, and she seems intent on taking advantage of a chance to expose a world that those who escape would often just as soon forget.



Davis always wanted to be an actor. At eight, when the family entered the rec center skit contest, she got the writer-actor-costume designer assignment (wardrobe budget: \$3) and shut herself in the closet to focus. ("I don't know why, because that's where the rats loved to go, with all the shoes.") Throughout grade school she was active in local theater. She demurs when asked if she was a star even then, adjusting the label to "star geek." In an interim year between high school and Rhode Island College, she was accepted at New York's prestigious Circle in the Square acting workshop, and she subsequently won a scholarship to Juilliard. (When she put on weight, the school told her to lose 40 pounds or go home.) Two years after graduating, Davis received a Tony nomination for her role in August Wilson's *Seven Guitars*. When he cast her in his next play, *King Hedley II*, she took the trophy home. Next came an Obie for her portrayal of

a lingerie designer in an off-Broadway production of *Intimate Apparel*. When she reprised the role at the Mark Taper, she won a Los Angeles Drama Critics Award.

Davis moved to Los Angeles when Steven Bochco cast her in 2000's *City of Angels*. "They billed the show as an all-black drama," she says. "That was a mistake." The series flopped, but Davis met her husband, actor Julius Tennon, on the set. The couple often work together. "Sometimes it's coincidence, and sometimes I say, 'I want my husband to work with me,'"

Davis says. "I have no problem with that, and neither does he."

Until the recent geyser of publicity, Davis was better known to a group of discerning directors than to the public. Oliver Stone created a role for her in *World Trade Center*; Steven Soderbergh cast her in *Out of Sight*, *Traffic*, and *Solaris*. In *Antwone Fisher*, Denzel Washington chose her to play the pivotal part of a drug addict who abandons her child. Davis barely speaks in her only scene, and as in *Doubt*, she's searing. More recently she appeared as a minister in Tyler Perry's *Medea Goes to Jail*. "Two years ago a friend of my mother's prophesied that Tyler would offer me a role and that I shouldn't turn it down," she says. In this month's *State of Play*, a thriller starring Russell Crowe, Davis is a pathologist with a secret past. She's just finishing her part as the mayor of Philadelphia in *Law Abiding Citizen*, opposite Gerard Butler and Jamie Foxx.

As the waitress clears our plates, a tidy cluster of the croutons Davis has discarded from her chopped salad is revealed. "That was pedestrian," she tsks, staring at the evidence. When we go down to the track, we find we've missed the first race—a remarkable feat given the clarity of the bugles and cheers later heard on my tape. The rain has started up again, so we turn to go. Her mother is flying into town this afternoon, and Alfre Woodard is throwing a party for Davis and her friend Taraji P. Henson, with whom she shared the Oscar ballot for Best Supporting Actress—only the second time two African Americans have been up for the award in the same year. Asked if she thinks the Obama administration might influence the role of black actors in Hollywood, Davis says yes. "I think there may be people who believe most black people aren't even educated, who see black women in very limited views," she says. "If you don't look like Halle Berry, then you're not in it. You can't be kind of interesting, quirky, a geek princess. But I think the world is changing. The younger generation doesn't see race the way we do. They really don't." ■