

Sleeveless metallic dress, **Lanvin**, \$2,795, collection at bergdorfgoodman.com. White gold earrings, **David Yurman**, price on request. Antique diamond brooches, from **Beladora.com**, prices on request. Pumps, **Giuseppe Zanotti Design**, \$995. For details, see *Shopping Guide*.



VIOLA DAVIS ICON

Not many actresses can go toe to toe with Meryl, make audiences weep on demand, and play a controversial role with such uncut grace and backbone it hushes cantankerous critics everywhere. Unless, that is, they're Viola Davis

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **DUSAN RELJIN** STYLED BY **SAMIRA NASR**

An hour and six minutes into 2008's *Doubt*, Viola Davis makes her first appearance on-screen. She knocks on the office door of Meryl Streep's Catholic school principal Sister Aloysius to meet about her son, a student. The two go for a walk during which Aloysius informs Davis' Mrs. Miller of a suspicion: that her boy has been sexually abused by a priest. What follows is Davis delivering a performance that transcends her lines, demonstrating what it means to confront the impossible decisions built into parenthood. The scene lasts all of 10 minutes and 28 seconds, but it earned Davis her first Oscar nomination for best supporting actress.

"She sort of came in with her own weather system," says *Doubt*'s writer-director, John Patrick Shanley. "You could feel Meryl's respect for her come flying out instantaneously, like, Wow, I'm fighting for my life in this scene against someone who's truly great." Streep agrees. "I am in awe of Viola," she says. "Her choices as an artist are invariably bold, scary, unconventional, and suffused with love. She has the stamina, the pure strength of purpose in her work of 10 men."

It took Davis two decades to land such a high-profile adversary. "I didn't get my SAG card until I was 30," says Davis, now 47. "But that's how it works. You keep putting your work out there, and at some point, if you're fortunate, if you're lucky, if you're blessed, it morphs into something. One role has led to another until I've emerged as this. This!"

❑ After the Oscar nomination for *Doubt*, did the quality of parts offered to you start to change? **A** If I'm honest, I would say no. The money changed. The visibility changed. The quality of the roles? No. I've been blessed to have been cast in some imaginative roles, but there's generally a lack of opportunity for women of color in Hollywood. ❑ On stage and on screen you regularly appear as dour. Never quite broken, but really burdened by life. In reality you are radiant. Why doesn't anyone let you appear that way on film? **A** I could walk into a room with lashes, cute makeup, maybe I've lost a few pounds, and maybe I have some

Davis won her first Tony in 2001, for August Wilson's *King Hedley II*, but life on-screen consisted mostly of brief roles in seemingly every police procedural that found its way to network. She drew acclaim in 2002 for two smaller but powerful parts: a maid in Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven* and a crack-addicted mother in Denzel Washington's *Antwone Fisher*. "Quiet characters are hard to play," says Davis. "You have to convey a whole slew of emotions without having the benefit of many words. Aibileen is quiet too."

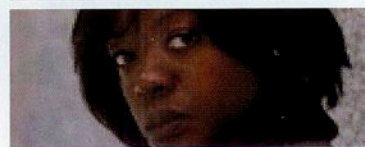
Aibileen Clark, of course, is one of three protagonists in *The Help*, the 2009 novel that sold millions of copies and grossed over \$100 million at the box office. She's also Davis' first blockbuster lead. As a maid working in Jackson, Mississippi, circa 1963, Davis makes Aibileen's world present and vivid by drawing inspiration from her own mother. "My mom was born on Singleton Plantation in South Carolina," says Davis. "She worked the tobacco fields, the cotton fields, and took care of kids from the age of four. These women lived hard lives."

Next month, Davis befriends an 11-year-old boy who lost his father on 9/11 in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, a big-screen adaptation of the Jonathan Safran Foer novel. Can we leave a Viola Davis film without crying, maybe just once? "It's good to be known for something," she says. "Being pigeonholed into these roles where I'm playing characters faced with difficult choices—those are princess problems."—**HOWIE KAHN**

heels on. And I always walk out with a role that's a little downtrodden. It's not for lack of trying. In real life, there's a quirkiness about me, more of a youthfulness than you've seen on-screen.

❑ What turned you on to acting? **A** It was watching Cicely Tyson in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. It was life-changing. I grew up in poverty in Central Falls, Rhode Island. We were the only black family, and we were hungry for any black image. We were watching *Sanford and Son* and *That's My Mama*. And all of a sudden Cicely Tyson pops up and plays this woman who ages from 18 to 105. I'd never seen anything like that. It rocked my world.

▶ MUST SEE



EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE, 2012 "I think [producer] Scott Rudin is one of the people out there who really sees me and can cast me in a movie like this. It's an imaginative role for a black woman."



THE HELP, 2011 "You can't get better than shooting a movie in the heart of Mississippi with a cast of actresses—and the cast was 99 percent actresses—all of who have no ego."



FENCES, 2010 "August Wilson, I call him my playwright. He speaks the language of the people I know. It was exhilarating to play Rose Maxson—probably one of the best things I've done in my career."



DOUBT, 2008 "Usually, I don't like anything. I'm very picky. It's not that I'm harsh on myself. I just have higher standards of what I want to achieve as an actor. But *Doubt* I liked when I first saw it. That was big for me."



SOLARIS, 2002 "It's based on a dense novel by a Polish writer, but sometimes you just feel good with people, comfortable. Working with Clooney and Soderbergh, it's a trusting atmosphere."



ANTWONE FISHER, 2002 "I wanted to bring a truth and humanity to the crack-addicted mother that I don't normally see. Not every addicted mom who gave up a child is cold. It's my job to be a truth teller."

Hair by Jamika Wilson at Epiphany Artist Group Inc.; makeup by Hide Pettersen Reljin; manicure by Nettie Davis; fashion assistant: Pipi Loose