

## Gaga over Gugu!

Written by Kam Williams

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Gugu Mbatha-Raw  
The "Belle" Interview  
with Kam Williams

Born in Oxford, England on June 30, 1983, Gugu Mbatha-Raw trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Her first professional role was as Celia in an open air production of Shakespeare's "As You Like It." Gugu subsequently landed roles at Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre where she performed the title roles of Cleopatra in "Antony and Cleopatra" and Juliet in "Romeo and Juliet," the latter opposite Andrew "Spider-Man" Garfield.

Her other stage credits include the critically-acclaimed "Big White Fog" at the Almeida Theatre and David Hare's "Gethsemane," a production at the National Theatre that later toured the UK. Gugu made her West End debut as Ophelia in "Hamlet" opposite Jude Law, which was brought across the pond to Broadway in 2009 where it became a big hit at the Broadhurst Theatre.

Her television credits include "MI-5," "Dr. Who," "Spooks," "Marple: Ordeal by Innocence," "Bonekickers" and "Fallout." In 2008, she was selected as a 'Star of Tomorrow' by the showbiz industry magazine Screen International. A couple of years later, Gugu starred as Samantha Bloom in the NBC-TV series, "Undercovers," for which she was nominated for an NAACP award for in the Best Actress in a Television Series category.

On the big screen, she found her first major feature film work in "Larry Crowne," directed by Tom Hanks and co-starring Julia Roberts, followed by "Odd Thomas" alongside Willem Dafoe. She also recently finished filming "Jupiter Ascending" with Channing Tatum and Mila Kunis.

Here, Gugu, who divides her time between L.A. and London, talks about playing the title character in "Belle," a biopic about Dido Elizabeth Belle (1761-1804), the orphaned offspring of an African slave and a British ship captain who was raised in England by her father's rich relations.

**Kam Williams:** Hi Gugu, thanks for the interview. I'm honored to have this opportunity.

**Gugu Mbatha-Raw:** Thank you, Kam.

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**KW:** I loved the film. Have you read my review yet?

**GMR:** No, I haven't seen it. I always get a little bit scared reading reviews, but I'm sure I'll read it at some point. [Laughs]

**KW:** I have a lot of questions for you for you from fans. Children's book author Irene Smalls asks: What interested you in the film and how did you feel about the idea of playing Dido Belle?

**GMR:** There were so many wonderful things that drew me to this project. First and foremost, the historical elements, the fact that this character really existed and that the script was inspired by a real painting. That was fascinating to me because, as a biracial girl growing up in England, I'd never really seen any historical characters who looked like me depicted on film before that weren't being brutalized or playing slaves. It was refreshing to know that there had been a biracial girl in the aristocracy. I felt that that was a perspective on history that had been so much overlooked, and a story that needed to be told. I was also drawn in by the romance, the beautiful love story at the core of the drama, having grown up with Jane Austen's classics like "Pride and Prejudice" and "Sense and Sensibility." I just thought that would be a fascinating period to explore. And besides being a period drama, we have so many contemporary themes in this film, such as race and class and gender and identity which, as is shown in the news nowadays, are still issues we're struggling with daily. So, I felt that Belle had a wonderful number of layers that made it a fascinating project.

**KW:** Environmental activist Grace Sinden asks: Is the prejudice we see in Belle at all relatable in today's more enlightened times?

**GMR:** Yeah, I think Belle is incredibly relatable, not only insofar as the issue of race, which is probably, on the surface, the most obvious one, but also in terms of the ambiguity and nuances of racism. After all, Belle's position was ambiguous. She was the daughter of a slave, but her father was in the aristocracy. I think that affords us the opportunity to explore those gray areas, the little slip-ups and subtle comments that are made in society. To me, that's very contemporary, as is the issue of identity. I think, irrespective of your race, everybody has moments in life where they don't fit in, or where they try to puzzle through who they really are or to find the courage of their convictions. I think this story really is about finding the courage to be your true self. And I think that is an eternal, universal theme, and a very inspiring one. So, yes, Grace, there's a lot of contemporary stuff in the film, despite its being set in the 18th Century.

**KW:** Grace has a follow-up: What research did you do in preparation for this role? Did you study 18th Century history to become more familiar with the culture of the period in which Belle is set, or did the screenplay supply sufficient background information?

**GMR:** For me, the script was definitely the starting point, because, although it was inspired by a true story and historical fact, the way I often connect with a character is on a human emotional level, and this script had those subtleties and nuances to it. Because I had grown up with Jane Austen novels and period dramas, I was very familiar with that period and that world already. On a personal level, I took some piano lessons and I listened to music of the period, like Handel, which helped me appreciate the elegance and sumptuousness of that style. And the cast also took some etiquette classes with Amma [director Amma Asante] to help us understand the bows, the curtseys and the manners of the time, which was really fascinating. I also spoke with Amma about Dido's trajectory, her growing from this naïve, quiet and quite accepting girl into a strong woman with political and romantic awakenings. For me, working with Amma was

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very rewarding, because she had done a tremendous amount of research. There were a lot of documents which she had sourced which provided context for the story. So, like I said, the script was the starting point, and we leapt off from there into the characters' relationships.

**KW:** What message do you think people will take away from Belle?

**GMR:** I really hope people will be inspired by the history of it, and the fact that it's a true story. The message, for me, at its core, really, is "Be who you are!" Don't worry about society's conditioning and the labels that are put on you by external forces. Hold onto your true self. The journey that Dido goes on is about learning to be comfortable in her own skin. I think that's an inspiring message that we always need to be reminded of in today's image-obsessed world.

**KW:** Harriet Pakula-Teweles asks: Given your being biracial, was this an especially emotionally-demanding role?

**GMR:** Well, it's an emotional story and I try to put myself into whatever character I play. Obviously, this film is about race and identity, and I am biracial everyday. [Laughs] Yes, Harriet, it was fun to explore those themes, especially the identity theme which is very contemporary. And yeah, it was an emotional experience, because it's essentially an emotional journey that Dido goes on, from her moments of self-harming, despair and frustration. And that starting point really gave us somewhere to go in terms of her becoming comfortable in her own skin and developing the confidence to stand up for herself. So, yes, it was a very, very emotional experience. But that's what I respond to in any role, the human condition and the human connection.

**KW:** Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier asks: Did you feel any pressure to do justice to Belle?

**GMR:** Absolutely! Because I had never played a real person before and since this was an incredibly refreshing tale to me. Even though there wasn't much evidence about Dido, factually, I felt this was a terrific opportunity to shed light on a period of history that has somewhat been overlooked and certainly has never been seen from this perspective before. A woman of color... in the lead... of a period drama... [Laughs] And she's not a slave... she's not being brutalized... She's being brought up as an heiress in a genteel society, at least one that's seemingly genteel on the surface. To me, that that was just such an inspiring new perspective. And because it was based on historical fact, I did feel a responsibility to make Dido as much of a living, breathing human being as possible, first and foremost.

**KW:** Lisa Loving asks: Do you see Belle as part of an emerging trend of historical films revisiting the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from a fresh perspective?

**GMR:** I hope so. I think that what makes Belle unique and different from recent films about the slave experience in the United States is that this one is about the British perspective. And not just the British perspective, but also a female perspective. I think there are so many more stories to be told surrounding this period of history and the legacy of the slave trade. It feels wonderful to be a part of a canon of films exploring this issue. I only hope that it opens the doorway for more stories to be told like this, so that we can celebrate our heritage and history.

**KW:** Attorney Bernadette Beekman asks: Do you recall your initial reaction years ago when you first saw the postcard of the painting which inspired the script?

**GMR:** Yes! When I saw the postcard, I was intrigued by Dido, because she had such a light in

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her eyes, and such a mischievous, almost vivacious gaze. My reaction was, "Wow! This girl really looks like she's got a personality," unlike other persons of color in period portraits who were usually depicted in those days as an ornament or to signify the status of their white counterpart. They'd be positioned almost like a pet in the painting. By contrast, Dido seemed to have so much life about her. That was what attracted me to her as a person to play. But it was only after shooting the film that myself and Sarah Gadon, who plays [Dido's cousin] Elizabeth [the other subject of the portrait] got to see the real painting in the flesh which was a magical experience after having spent all that time staring at the postcard and inhabiting the character. So, to see the actual painting was very special.

**KW:** Bernadette also asks: How do you define yourself as a performer, given that you've done stage, TV, film, and even radio?

**GMR:** Well, I try not to limit myself. The actors that inspire me are the comedians and the people able to shape-shift into different roles and into different media. That ensures your longevity as an artist and prevents you from getting bored with yourself and, hopefully, prevents people from getting bored with you. [LOL] So, for me, it's about variety and working with inspiring, creative people. I try not to define myself. Other people are going to do that for you anyway. [Laughs some more] I like being free to take on any project that inspires me and to trust that the work will speak for itself.

**KW:** Lastly, Bernadette would like to know whether you ever worked with a female director before Amma Asante.

**GMR:** Amma Asante is a unique person in several regards, independent of being male or female. I think I might have worked with a couple of female directors in television, but never before with one on film. Amma is incredibly talented, incredibly articulate, and had such a crystal clear vision from the outset of this world we were creating. She was very inspiring! She has a lot of heart, and was very detailed in her directions and notes. I loved working with her and, being a woman, she obviously put a lot of herself into this interpretation. And Belle not only had a female director, but a female scriptwriter and even a female composer. I believe having a female point-of-view was wonderful for such a female-centric story being told in a voice that hadn't been heard before. So, I am hopeful that this will open the door for more female-driven films.

**KW:** Larry Greenberg asks: What kind of direction did Amma Asante give you about Dido Belle's relationship with Lady Elizabeth Murray?

**GMR:** This is something that Amma was very passionate about. Even though they were only cousins biologically, they were nevertheless very much a sisterhood. I know that Amma herself has a sister she's very close to, and the intensity of sisterhood was something she very much wanted to explore in the film, not only because the starting point was the painting where they are depicted in such an intimate way with a feeling of affection, but also because of a desire to create a Jane Austen "Sense and Sensibility" dynamic in exploring the depth of that bond. Consider the scene where they have a fierce argument and are saying the most horrible things to each other. I think you can only really explore in that fashion with intimate family. So, yes, Amma was constantly nurturing us to create a sisterhood bond, and Sarah Gadon is such a fun and lovely actress to work with that it was pretty easy to achieve. And we're the best of friends now.

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**KW:** Sweet! I'm glad I mentioned Jane Austen in my review. I must have picked up on what Amma was going for.

**GMR:** Absolutely! That world of Jane Austen was definitely an inspiration to Amma and to myself as well.

**KW:** Thanks again for the time, Gugu, and best of luck with Belle.

**GMR:** Thank you very much, Kam. Bye!

To see a trailer for Belle, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTz5VjBscGk>