

— *The Making of* —

KING RICHARD

Will Smith was eager to play the father of tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams, but he had one stipulation: The family had to be fully on board

BY PAMELA MCCLINTOCK

Isha Price was in New York City to urge on her sisters, tennis legends Serena and Venus Williams, at the 2018 U.S. Open when she took a detour on the second day of the Grand Slam tournament to meet with film producer Tim White and screenwriter Zach Baylin. It wasn't the first time Hollywood had come calling with an idea for a movie about her famous siblings, but every other pitch had landed outside the service line.

This time was different. Baylin's script centered on the family's early years and, more specifically, Richard Williams, the larger-than-life dad and coach whose ambitious and, some would say, unorthodox plan to transform his daughters into champions succeeded (he wrote a 78-page manifesto before either girl was born). "I really appreciated that the story was told from my dad's perspective. He's been vilified for so long," says Price, a

Washington, D.C.-based attorney who advises her siblings.

Nor did it hurt that the project already had attracted the interest of a major studio, Warner Bros., and actor Will Smith, who had become fascinated with Richard Williams years earlier when watching him defend Venus during a TV interview. "Richard was one of the most misunderstood figures in tennis, and I absolutely loved the idea of playing someone that people think they knew, when they actually had the completely wrong idea of who he actually was — especially to his family," Smith says.

There was one caveat: Smith would star in the \$50 million-plus movie only if the real-life family gave its blessing.

Everything hinged on the lunch with Price, hosted by Baylin and White — who played tennis on the junior tennis circuit and now runs a production company with his brother Trevor White — at Michael's restaurant in midtown

Manhattan. "We knew that if Isha hated it, it was all going to fall apart," says Baylin. "My recollection was that it was a very long night waiting to hear back. Then we got a call, and Isha said, 'If you're willing to sit down and hear our experiences, then we're interested in going on this ride with you guys.'"

That ride pulled up to the finish line Nov. 15, when Isha and her sisters turned up for the world premiere of *King Richard* at AFI Fest in Los Angeles after a high-profile screening at the Telluride Film Festival over Labor Day weekend. The movie has been embraced by critics for providing an inside glimpse of how two of history's greatest athletes began their historic journey as kids growing up in Compton, California — where Serena, Venus and half sisters Isha, Lyndrea and the late Yetunde Price shared a small bedroom — before moving to West Palm Beach, Florida, so that a 10-year-old Venus could



KING COURTESY OF WARNER BROS. (3); IBS; CHABELLA JAMES/WARNER BROS. (2)



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1 Will Smith is a frontrunner for a best actor Oscar nomination for his performance as Richard Williams, father of Venus and Serena Williams. **2** Demi Singleton (left) stars as Serena and Saniyya Sidney as Venus. **3** Director Reinaldo Marcus Green (right) on set with cinematographer Robert Elswit. **4** The two young actresses became as close as sisters during filming, which was interrupted for six months because of COVID-19. **5** From left: Daniele Lawson as older sister Isha, Singleton as Serena and Aunjanue Ellis as their mother, Oracene Price.



5

enroll in Rick Macci's legendary tennis academy.

King Richard, which is expected to be a player in this year's Oscar race, opened Nov. 19 simultaneously in theaters and on HBO Max. The film has struggled at the box office, grossing only \$11 million in its first 10 days. The hope now is that awards recognition will give *King Richard* renewed life. In particular, Smith is considered a frontrunner for a best actor nomination.

After first learning of a possible movie about Serena and Venus in 2017, Baylin told Trevor and Tim White, whose producing credits include Steven Spielberg's *The Post* as well as the acclaimed indie film *Wind River*, of his idea to focus on the years before Venus turned pro at age 14. "The idea of re-creating the U.S. Open and other championships just didn't seem dramatic to me," says Baylin. "What seemed most compelling was to try and find the moment where everything was on the line for them. The dream that the whole family had gotten on board with was either going to take off or it was going to crash and burn."

Price embraced the approach. After the lunch at Michael's, she worked on persuading the rest of the brood to do the same. "We had to have a real family consensus. I'll be 100 percent honest: There were a couple of holdouts," says Price. "It took some time, but I knew I could get them there." She won't say who the holdouts were or whether they included Richard Williams. The elder Williams, now 79, has been notably silent in terms of commenting publicly on *King Richard*; nor has he done any press. Price won't reveal why.

Director Reinaldo "Rei" Marcus Green began shooting *King Richard* in February 2020 before COVID-19 shut down production for six months. Price and her tennis-star sisters have executive producing credits, while Will Smith shares producing credits with Tim and Trevor White.

Green, Baylin and Tim White spent a weekend with Venus in 2019 at her home in Jupiter Island, Florida. They went through the script line by line. Serena gave notes as well, while Price made plans to relocate to L.A. temporarily so that she could be on set every day. The sisters were adamant that there be no hint of rivalry between Venus and Serena and asked for certain tweaks to the script. They also are fiercely protective of their mother, Oracene Price, and insisted that her character — played by Aunjanue Ellis, who is garnering buzz for her performance in the best supporting actress race — be given her fair due as a mother and a coach even if she isn't an extrovert like her husband.

"I understand a lot of what Ms. Oracene went through — rejection, feeling overlooked, the sting of feeling marginalized, the sting of doing things without getting credit for it," says Ellis, who listened to hours of taped interviews Isha Price did with her mom. Oracene Price didn't visit the set of *King Richard*, but Serena and Venus did. They showed up one day and spent several hours with the two young actresses who play them, Demi Singleton and Saniyya Sidney, respectively (neither of the film's two young stars had previously played tennis, and they took intensive lessons).



1 The Williams sisters insisted that the movie, set in the early 1990s, be authentic in re-creating their early tennis years and family life. 2 Jon Bernthal plays tennis coach Rick Macci. 3 The movie ends with Venus (Saniyya Sidney) playing in her first professional tournament at age 14. 4 *King Richard* producers and brothers Trevor (left) and Tim White (center) on set with Green.



“They surprised us,” recalls Singleton of meeting the sisters. “They just spoke about their childhood and what it was like growing up. It was really cool because everyone knows them as tennis stars, but it was amazing to get to know and learn about a different side of them. Serena spoke about what it was like having to jump between her older sisters’ beds every night, the games they would play, the songs their sister Lyn wrote and the boys that they dated.”

Isha Price advised the various actors on a daily basis in terms of certain behaviors and characteristics, such as how Venus or Serena would hold a racket or hit a ball. She also kept Venus and Serena updated — they use WhatsApp for what they call frequent “sisterhood chats” — and sometimes shared dailies if it was a sensitive scene. “You have to understand, my sisters were busy playing tennis. The reason I felt it was important for me to be on set is because we didn’t know how Hollywood works,” says Price.

Green (*Monsters and Men*, *Joe Bell*) says he welcomed the input. In 2018, he’d been sent the *King Richard* script by at least four friends. He figures part of the reason was his sports background — he was a star baseball player in

high school. He called his agent and was told the family wasn’t yet on board. By the time they were, he’d committed to direct another film. Green told Tim and Trevor White to let him know if the production schedule for *King Richard* shifted. Sure enough, it did, and he was able to begin preproduction in late 2019 for a winter start date in Los Angeles after rounding out the cast, which features Daniele Lawson as Isha Price, Layla Crawford as Lyndrea Price, Mikayla Lashae Bartholomew as Yetunde Price and Tony Goldwyn as coach Paul Cohen.

The start of production coincided with increasing concern over a new virus. With each day, the news was more ominous. On

the morning of March 20, 2020, as cinemas nationwide closed, Green received a call from Warner’s film chief Toby Emmerich. Says Green, “I was like, ‘Wait, the head of the studio is calling me?’ It was pretty cool, but I didn’t know what was happening. He was very happy with the dailies and was just reassuring us that the studio was going to be there.”

That day, a Friday, Smith and Green decided to wrap at lunch. They and the White brothers expected to return Monday. But it would be six months before they could resume the 52-day-plus shoot. “I got a call on Saturday or Sunday from the studio saying, ‘We’re officially on pause until further notice,’” says Green.

Green, Smith and the White brothers held weekly Zoom calls for the cast and crew. Sometimes a smaller group would gather at Smith’s home to watch footage and rehearse. The forced break had its benefits for the filmmakers. With Green shooting the film chronologically, the two young actresses appeared appropriately older after the six-month break. On the flip side, Smith and co-star Jon Bernthal, who plays Macci, had to keep the facial hair they’d grown for their roles (Bernthal’s mustache had to be written into the script of *The Many Saints of Newark*, for which he did reshoots during the *King Richard* hiatus).

“Shutting down in the middle of COVID could have been devastating creatively. Of course the challenges of a film set are nothing compared to the health and safety of all people, but we did have to make sure it didn’t trip anything up when we returned,” Smith says. “Rei, the cast and I would find ways to stay connected, talk about the story and just laugh and vibe together. For real, though, the entire crew felt so responsible for this family — and the family we were creating on set — that no one let it slip. I also couldn’t shake the protective vibe we had going on set, not unlike *Richard* was with his girls.” **THR**

