

South African stage director set to direct Aretha Franklin biopic

Metro Goldwyn Mayer Pictures (MGM) has announced that acclaimed South African born stage director Liesl Tommy is set to direct *Respect*, a feature film based on the life of music icon Aretha Franklin. Tommy is the first black woman to earn a Tony Award nomination for Best Direction of a Play for her work on Broadway's *Eclipsed*.



Acclaimed South African born stage director, Liesl Tommy.

Oscar, Golden Globe, Screen Actors Guild, Bafta and Grammy Award winner Jennifer Hudson was handpicked by Ms Franklin, the first female to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, to play her. Academy Award winner Callie Khouri (*Thelma & Louise*, creator of CMT's *Nashville*) will pen the screenplay following Franklin's early music career.

The announcement was made by Jonathan Glickman, president, Motion Picture Group, MGM and the film's producers, Scott Bernstein (*Straight Outta Compton*) and Harvey Mason, Jr. (*Sing*, *Pitch Perfect*)

Tradecraft's Scott Bernstein who produced the groundbreaking biopic *Straight Outta Compton* about the infamous gangster rappers N.W.A., which garnered an Academy Award nomination for best screenplay, and Harvey Mason, Jr., Grammy Award-nominated renowned music producer who has written and produced songs for both Aretha Franklin and Jennifer Hudson, will produce. Glickman and Adam Rosenberg, MGM's co-president of production, are overseeing the project on behalf of the studio.

One of the great American stories of all time

Tommy was born in Cape Town, and grew up there, until she moved to Boston, Massachusetts when she was 15-years-old.

She is known for both her provocative world premieres and re-imagining classics with racially diverse casts in several shows including a 2012 production of *Hamlet* at California Shakespeare Theatre and an internationally acclaimed production of *Les Misérables* at Dallas Theater Center.

She is also on board to direct *Born a Crime*, the film adaptation of the autobiography by the same name by Trevor Noah starring Lupita Nyong'o for Paramount Players. In addition to developing and directing *Frozen Live*, the multi-media theatrical extravaganza adaptation of the Disney film for the Hyperion Theater in Disneyland, Tommy has also directed episodes of AMC's *Walking Dead*, HBO's *Insecure* and OWN's *Queen Sugar* created by Ava DuVernay.

"The story of Aretha Franklin's journey from child prodigy in Detroit to international supernova is rife with struggle and triumph, making her life one of the great American stories of all time. As a filmmaker there is no greater gift than to be able to bring this transcendent chronicle of a woman's fight for self-realisation to visual life with the enormous talents of the soulful Jennifer Hudson, Callie Khouri, and our incredible producers," says Tommy.

The Queen of Soul

Respect is the story about one woman's struggle to find self-respect in the face of the ever-changing landscape of America during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Ms Franklin sold over 110 million records worldwide and won 18 Grammy Awards (nine in a row from 1967 to 1975). Franklin's reinvention of Otis Redding's *Respect* as a feminist anthem transformed her into an icon of the civil rights and women's movements.

She was one of the most honoured artists in Grammy Award history, winning her 18th honour in 2008. The range of her achievements and her commitment continue to be an inspiration to young musicians everywhere. It is clear, however, that her early hits such as *Do Right Woman—Do Right Man*, *Natural Woman* and *Respect*, will remain the defining work of "the Queen of Soul."

"Aretha Franklin was indisputably one of the most important cultural and musical forces the world has ever seen. Along with our producers, we could not be more excited to have assembled such a tremendous team of Liesl, Callie and the incomparable Jennifer Hudson to bring the Queen of Soul's iconic story and music to big screens around the world," said Glickman.

Inspirational and legendary lifestory

"It is an absolute honour to be a part of bringing Ms Franklin's story to audiences who adore her around the world. She is one of the most iconic and talented artists of all time and what a dream come true it is to portray her extraordinary life on screen. I could not be more excited to be working alongside Liesl Tommy, a brilliant and thoughtful director, who is no doubt the perfect choice to lead the film," said Hudson.

"Over the years and in our many meetings and countless conversations with Aretha, we came to understand the stories she most wanted to share and the moments in her life that made her who she was. It was an honour to have gotten that insight directly from Ms Franklin and we are now taking the utmost care in upholding her legacy and accurately portraying her inspirational and legendary life story," said Mason, Jr. and Bernstein.