



Magnolia Pictures, Cortés Filmworks Production, In Association with Lane B Production, Vogue Studios, Whitewater Films, and JustFilms/Ford Foundation

INVISIBLE BEAUTY

Directed by Bethann Hardison, Frédéric Tcheng

PRODUCER: Lisa Cortés

CO-PRODUCER: Paul Dallas

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Hallee Adelman, John Boccardo, Derek Esplin, Ivy Herman, Rick Rosenthal, Nancy Stephens, Andrea Van Beuren, and Naomi Campbell

2023 | U.S. | 115 minutes

Official Selection

2023 Sundance Film Festival – World Premiere, Premieres Section

2023 Tribeca Festival – Documentary Spotlight Section

2023 Hot Docs

2023 SFFILM

FINAL PRESS NOTES

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SYNOPSIS

An essential memoir of fashion pioneer Bethann Hardison, *INVISIBLE BEAUTY* shines a spotlight on the singular and unapologetic Hardison, one of the fashion industry's most influential icons who, as a pioneering Black model, modeling agent and entrepreneur, has pushed the boundaries of fashion culture and has been at the forefront of progress throughout her career. In her lifetime, Hardison has seen the pendulum swing toward and away from the Black model. At every setback, she spoke up and rallied her colleagues and clients in the industry to advance change. Now in her 70s, the Brooklyn native is writing her memoir, taking stock of her own legacy at a moment when the fashion industry was shaken by discrimination. In *INVISIBLE BEAUTY*, Tcheng and Hardison trace her impact on fashion from runway shows in the 1970s to roundtables about the lack of racial diversity in the early 2000s. Featuring intimate interviews with luminaries including Iman, Tyson Beckford, Tracee Ellis Ross, Zendaya, Fran Lebowitz, Pat Cleveland, Naomi Campbell, and Stephen Burrows, *INVISIBLE BEAUTY* is an absorbing record of the racial evolution of fashion and an original contemplation on the life of an unparalleled trailblazer.

Directed by Bethann Hardison and Frédéric Tcheng, *INVISIBLE BEAUTY* is produced by Lisa Cortés. Executive producers are Hallee Adelman, John Boccardo, Derek Esplin, Ivy Herman, Rick Rosenthal, Nancy Stephens, Andrea Van Beuren, and Naomi Campbell. Co-Executive producers are David Chan, Heidi & Chris Stolte, Robina Riccitiello. A Cortés Filmworks Production, In Association with Lane B Productions, Vogue Studios, Whitewater Films, and justfilms/Ford Foundation.

ABOUT THE FILM

Invisible Beauty

Directed by Bethann Hardison and Frédéric Tcheng

Through rich archival material, *Invisible Beauty* revives the energy of several decades of New York City's cultural life: The liberating 60s with its "Black is Beautiful" mantra, Hardison's first test shoot with Bruce Weber in 1969, her iconic turn at the Battle of Versailles in 1973, Studio 54, the 1980s downtown art scene with friends Keith Haring and Basquiat, the Black Girls Coalition in 1988 — and never-before-seen raw footage of Hardison's 2007 town hall meetings that shook the fashion industry by sounding the alarm about diversity.

Hardison fearlessly reveals the intimate details of her personal journey as a single mother, a Black owner in a white industry, a fierce truth teller and relentless believer in the power of racial integration.

The results of Hardison's efforts are evident today. The Council of Fashion Designers of America recognized Hardison's transformative role with a Founder's Award in 2014. But for Hardison, the battle isn't over. Black models seem to have secured their place in front of the lens, yet work remains for diversity behind the scenes. In 2018, Hardison founded the Designers Hub to develop resources for emerging Black designers. In 2020, the fashion industry was shaken to its core by the Black Lives Matter movement. Every brand, institution and leader was faced with reevaluating their relationship to race. Hardison, now an advisor to the CFDA and Gucci, speaks at the center of the conversation. With five decades of experience, Hardison finds herself in a unique position, between establishment power players and a new generation of changemakers demanding systemic justice.

About Bethann Hardison

Bethann Hardison's formative years were split between two worlds: Brooklyn and North Carolina. In Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, she was raised between the households of a carefree mother and a father who was an Islamic leader. She flourished as an independent spirit in a vibrant community. But in North Carolina, where she spent summers with her grandmother, she witnessed another side of Black life in America: racial segregation and inequality.

When Hardison started working in the Garment district in the late 1960s, her unique style quickly caught the attention of the emerging Black designer Willi Smith. She became his muse, and one of a handful of Black models who changed the course of fashion. Hardison didn't walk the runway, she danced it. At the legendary 1973 Battle of Versailles fashion event she stared down a French audience of fashion elites until they stomped their feet in approval. She became a star, and a new era in fashion was born.

In the 70s, Hardison jumped into the exhilarating scene of New York City headfirst. A fixture in downtown nightlife and at Studio 54, she formed life-long relationships with Andy Warhol, Fran Lebowitz, Stephen Burrows, Iman, and later with Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat. All while juggling life as a single mother to her son Kadeem, who

would become an actor and the star of the hit television show *A Different World* as “Dwayne Wayne.”

In 1984, Hardison took the bold step of opening her own modeling agency. As a Black business owner in a white-dominated industry, she represented a mix of models in order to remain competitive while advancing models of color. She signed the next generation of Black superstars including Veronica Webb and Tyson Beckford, who made history with an exclusive contract with Ralph Lauren. Seeing the success of Black models, Hardison decided to celebrate and create community. With Iman she co-founded the Black Girls Coalition, which organized fundraisers and awareness campaigns.

By the late 1990s, Hardison noticed the slow reversal of diversity in the fashion industry. Casting directors started saying openly, “no Blacks, no ethnics.” Witnessing the achievements of the 70s and 80s begin to backslide, Hardison took action. She held press conferences and town hall meetings that disrupted the industry. She found an important ally in the late Franca Sozzani, the former Fashion Editor of *Vogue Italia*. Together they collaborated on the now famous 2008 “All Black Issue.” It was an instant hit that was reprinted three times — and proved that diversity could sell.

By 2013 when Black models began to fade from view again, Hardison took the radical step of writing open letters to fashion councils around the world, calling out specific designers who consistently hired few or no models of color in their shows. She enlisted Naomi and Iman to take to the television airwaves to broadcast the message: “No matter the intent, the result is racism.

Collaboration: Statement by Bethann Hardison and Frédéric Tcheng

Invisible Beauty is first and foremost a collaboration between us. Through co-directing, we want to rethink the way we make films. The relationship between filmmaker and subject is often characterized by unequal access to power, privilege and authorship.

Who is allowed to tell a story? Who is allowed to control an image? Who has the privilege of self-representation? These questions have clear parallels with the questions raised by Bethann’s advocacy work. We wanted to put them at the core of our process. We worked together to make Bethann’s voice central to the telling of her story. Through active interrogation and intergenerational dialogue, we strived to explore more fully the existential nature of a life well lived.

Bethann Hardison's Life — A Timeline

“The fashion model was the tool I had in my shed. I always thought, if I can change who is seen on runways and in magazines, perhaps I can change the way people think.” —
Bethann Hardison

Childhood Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn & summers in North Carolina

1967 Meets Willi Smith

1973 Participates in the Battle of Versailles fashion show

1984 Opens her own modeling agency

1988 Co-founds the Black Girls Coalition

1994 Tyson Beckford Ralph Lauren Campaign

2007–2008 Organizes industry Town Hall meetings, collaborates on *Vogue Italia*'s “All Black Issue”

2013 Writes open letters to fashion councils worldwide

2014 Receives the CFDA Founder's Award

2018–2019 Establishes the Designers Hub with the CFDA Becomes Inaugural member of Gucci's Changemakers Council

BIOGRAPHIES

Bethann Hardison, Director

Advocate, model, and muse—with a career spanning over five decades, Bethann Hardison has gone from working in New York City’s Garment District to founding her namesake agency where she guided the careers of some of the most prominent models in the world. In 1988, she founded the Black Girls Coalition, and in 2013, she spearheaded the launch of the Diversity Coalition sparking an industry-wide movement for diversity and inclusion. In recognition of her decades of advocacy work, Bethann received the CFDA’s Founder’s Award in 2014. In 2018, with the support of the CFDA, she founded The Designer’s Hub to guide and empower Black designers, and in 2019 became an inaugural member of Gucci’s Changemakers Council. Bethann currently serves on the CFDA’s Board of Directors and as Gucci’s Executive Advisor for Global Equity and Cultural Engagement.

Frédéric Tcheng, Director

Frédéric Tcheng is a French-born filmmaker based in Brooklyn, New York. He co-produced and co-edited *Valentino: The Last Emperor*, which premiered at the Venice Film Festival and was shortlisted for Best Documentary Feature at the Academy Awards. He is the co-director of the acclaimed documentary *Diana Vreeland: The Eye Has To Travel*, which the *New York Times* called “dizzily enjoyable.” His award-winning directorial debut *Dior and I* premiered at the 2014 Tribeca Film Festival and was released by The Orchard. His film *Halston* was executive produced by CNN Films and premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. He has served as a filmmaking mentor for Queer Art, a non-profit arts organization in New York that serves a diverse community of LGBTQ+ artists across generations and disciplines. He studied engineering in France and is a graduate of the film program at Columbia University’s School of the Arts.

Lisa Cortés, Producer

Lisa Cortés is an Emmy-winning producer and director. She is the President of Cortés Filmworks, a New York based multimedia production company. *Little Richard: I Am Everything* (CNN Films), which she directed and produced, had its world premiere as the opening night selection in the US documentary competition at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival, where it was acquired by Magnolia Films. Also premiering at Sundance was *Invisible Beauty*, the documentary about Black fashion industry pioneer Bethann Hardison, which she produced. In 2020, Cortés directed and produced *All In: The Fight For Democracy*, tracing the violent history of the voting rights struggle. Emmy-winning HBO documentary, *The Apollo* (2019), which Cortés produced, explores African American cultural and political history through the story of the legendary Apollo Theater. Cortés executive produced *Precious* (2009) which was nominated for six Academy Awards® and won two. The film received the Sundance Audience Award and

Grand Jury Prize for best drama. Her film productions have received over 80 international awards and nominations.

Paul Dallas, Co-Producer

Paul Dallas is a writer, producer, and director based in Brooklyn. He is the co-writer of the upcoming drama *Reality* starring Sydney Sweeney as real-life whistleblower Reality Winner and he is the director of the upcoming comedy/drama short *Clean Me*. His producing credits include *Halston* (Sundance '19) for CNN Films, *This Is Paris* (Tribeca '20) for YouTube Originals, the comedy/drama *The Plagiarists* (Berlinale and ND/NF '19), and the experimental short *Tender* (Visions du Réel '21) for Field of Vision. His film writing has been published in Artforum, BOMB, Brooklyn Magazine, Cinema Scope, Film Comment, Filmmaker Magazine, the Village Voice and elsewhere. He serves on the advisory board of the art journal Extra Extra Magazine and has curated film series in New York for the Guggenheim Museum and Maysles Cinema. He is a graduate of The Cooper Union School of Architecture.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Directed by Bethann Hardison and Frédéric Tcheng

Written by Bethann Hardison, Frédéric Tcheng, Chris McNabb

Producer: Lisa Cortés

Co-Producer: Paul Dallas

Editors: Chris McNabb, Frédéric Tcheng

Co-Editor: Hannah Buck

Directors Of Photography: Mia Cioffi Henry, Frédéric Tcheng

Music by Marc Anthony Thompson

Music Supervisor: Ciara Elwis

Archival Producer: Paul Dallas

Co-Executive Producers:

David Chan

Robina Riccitiello

Chris Stolte

Heidi Stolte

Executive Producers:

Hallee Adelman

John Boccoardo

Derek Esplin

Ivy Herman

Rick Rosenthal

Nancy Stephens

Andrea Van Beuren

Jeff Zimbalist

Naomi Campbell

Invisible Beauty was supported by Catalyst, Sundance Institute's film financing program. Catalyst connects independent filmmakers and financiers and has raised over \$50 million

for films like *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*, *Ailey*, *The Truffle Hunters*, *Crip Camp* and more.