

Dana Gills, Asha Kamali May, and Jeanette McDuffie: ‘Milk + Honey’ is a Journey of Well-timed Collaborations

 www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/595d8609e4b0cf3c8e8d561d

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After an almost five-year hiatus, Dana Gills, Asha Kamali May, and Jeanette McDuffie are teaming up with Issa Rae Productions to release all new episodes of their much talked about web series, *Milk + Honey*. I sat down with the Brown Paper Dolls Productions trio to discuss their creative journey. From having Idris Elba as their executive producer and their pilot episode earning over 150 thousand views, producing this series has been a journey of well-timed collaborations.

“We’ve always tried to collaborate with other artists we believe in and love. Issa is one of those people. ... She’s a friend who had a platform that we love, and we have a show that we’ve been talking to her about since we kind of first started together,” said Dana.

Sustaining a multi-year collaboration is challenging. Jeanette says their staying power is having a passion for seeing diverse images of black women on the screen and divine timing. “When you share that mission, it’s easier to stay connected. I’ll be really transparent, the journey of Hollywood and this process is a challenge. ... That’s the nature of Hollywood and creation.”

At their core, they are women with different views but complimentary skills. “I find that when the three of us are working together, and we’re all on the same page, really great things happen. For that reason, I’m glad that we’re keeping that going,” said Jeanette.

“The conversation is so much about women helping women, black women helping women, and not waiting for people to give you an opportunity and not waiting for permission. I’m not sure how many examples we really have of that in terms of black women collaborating in film and TV. It’s very challenging,” added Asha.

In an interview, Idris Elba explained that he joined the project because “of the strong demand for content that is relatable and authentic.” While the series has evolved, the creators believe that it’s still vital to share the black woman experience. “Ultimately, our goal and mission have always been the same: to create images of ourselves and our friends so people can see that [black people] are real and multidimensional ... There is a need and space for more stories like that,” said Dana.

Milk + Honey is about figuring out the ‘Hollywood jungle’. There’s no doubt that Jeanette, Asha, and Dana have long careers ahead of them. So far, Dana thinks their biggest lesson is “With greater access comes greater challenges, and it’s always another level. ... We were working hard and doing the things that we feel like we should be doing. We were navigating the jungle. I just think God continually presented people on our journey that we can connect with. It’s never easy, but it’s been amazing to watch when you are faithful and diligent and that God will continue to lead the way. Stay motivated. Don’t feel discouraged when people say ‘no’. Realize you are doing this for a certain reason.”

Since the series first premiered, all three creators earned their graduate degrees from top institutions. Asha Kamali May who plays Nia in *Milk + Honey*, earned her M.F.A. in theater and acting performance from CSULB. Dana (producer) earned her M.F.A. from UCLA’s producer’s program. Jeannette (director and writer) has an M.F.A. in film production from USC.

“I’m always inspired by women. Seeing Jeanette go back to school and seeing how excellent she was – how much more efficient, how knowledgeable she was. I was impressed. Then Dana went back and [the result] was triple fold

with her. What she can speak to, what she saw, and our conversation from her viewpoint was – wow! ... When I'm in a scene with Debbie Allen, Lance Gross, Boris Kodjoe, or whoever, I want to bring it and be able to know what I'm doing," said Asha.

In this second run, the creative trio known as Brown Paper Dolls Productions is focused on starting a dialog with their audience. They describe this moment as a "great place of being open".

Watch the all new episodes of *Milk + Honey* on [Issa Rae's YouTube channel](#). You can connect with the creators on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), or [Twitter](#).