

‘When They See Us’ Creator Ava DuVernay & Emmy Nominated Cast Seek “Restorative Justice” In Central Park 5 Netflix Series

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In April 1989, the lives of five young men of color were irrevocably and horrifically changed. Wrongly accused of raping a white female jogger, they were first arbitrarily rounded up by police simply for being in the area, then pushed into false confessions that would ultimately land them a collective name that resonates in the memory of America: The Central Park Five.



Sentenced to five to 15 years, Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana and Korey Wise lost so much more than their youths, and their fates were set in no small part by full-page ads in the New York papers calling for their death penalty—paid for by one Donald Trump, real estate developer.

Widespread misunderstanding of the slang ‘wilin’ out’—which essentially just means heading out as a group to have a good time—added to the miasma of racism that condemned the young men. It was quickly turned into the term ‘wilding’, becoming an NYPD and media buzzword that conveniently suggested the teenagers were out-of-control and out for blood, rather than simply hanging out with friends.



Over a decade later, in 2002, a one-time fellow inmate of Wise’s at a maximum-security prison revealed that he had in fact been the Central Park rapist that night. Despite some pushback from police and prosecutors on reopening the case, DNA evidence confirmed the serial rapist and murderer’s confession. Though they received far less coverage for their exoneration than they did for their arrests and trial beforehand, the Five saw their convictions vacated and their names removed from the sex offender registry.

In 2014, the Five reached a multi-million-dollar settlement with the City of New York. That restitution was followed by soon-to-be candidate Trump’s decision to call the settlement a “disgrace”—a stance he reiterated as the Republican nominee for President in 2016.

Now, Ava DuVernay has given those young men the voices they always deserved. Directing, co-writing and producing the limited series When They See Us for Netflix, DuVernay’s work became one of the streamer’s most-watched series this year. And thus, the truth will out.

A subsequent 16 Emmy nominations include Outstanding Limited Series and dual nods for DuVernay herself, while Jharrel Jerome—playing Korey Wise as both a teen and an adult—is nominated for Outstanding Lead Actor. Aunjanue Ellis and Niecy Nash are Outstanding Lead Actress contenders for their performances as the mothers of Yusef Salaam and Wise. Asante Blackk, John Leguizamo, Michael K. Williams, Marsha Stephanie Blake, Vera Farmiga and cinematographer Bradford Young are also among the *When They See Us* team recognized by the Academy.

DuVernay, the director behind *Selma* and the Oscar- and Emmy-nominated documentary *13th*, has put together yet another piece of work that has the power to change lives and has us all questioning the status quo. As with all great accomplishments, the work behind the show was complex, labor-intensive and deeply, utterly involving. DuVernay, *Moonlight*’s Jerome, *Lovecraft County*’s Ellis, and *Claws*’ Nash found that getting the series exactly right comprised many stages, not least getting to the raw heart of the story and the men at its core.

Ava DuVernay was in her teens when the Central Park jogger attack occurred. As she readied to go to work on *13th*, social media opened a door to the past...

Ava DuVernay: I remember hearing about it at the time, and it was a big case. It was a big case for the black community; it was a big case nationally for a while. I remember the adults speaking about it, particularly around the word ‘wilding’. It was a word that intrigued me. I wanted to know what it meant. So that stuck with me.



Then I got this tweet from Raymond Santana, and it was right around springtime of 2015 and *Selma*. He said, “What’s your next film going to be on? #thecentralparkfive.” And he said, “#fingerscrossed”. I wouldn’t have known him by name, but his Twitter account said Central Park Five. That’s what his handle was. That’s the only reason why it caught my attention. I just watched Sarah Burns’ 2012 documentary on the subject—maybe the year before—so it really caught my attention. I actually DMed him back. I said when I was in New York next, I’d look him up. And I actually did.

Aunjanue Ellis: I knew about the case, and New York was hopping for a while with these injustices. You had Abner Louima, and you had Amadou Diallo. There were all these high-profile cases that happened, and it was very, very intense for a moment. And then they just sort of disappeared. But you know, I was there when those things happened. So, I know what it's like for that to be in the air in New York City. It's like you have all this raw emotion that comes from that experience and you don't have nowhere to do anything with it, you know?

Jharrel Jerome: I wasn't even close to being born. I was born in '97.

DuVernay: In comparison to what had happened to them in '89, when they were freed and their names cleared, it was really just a blip on the radar. Many people we talked to as we were working on this, a lot of people still thought they were guilty, and they just timed out; [had] gotten out. They didn't really understand the nuances of what actually occurred. You'd be surprised at how many people were like, "I never even knew."

Niecy Nash: I didn't know about the case until I became an adult, and when I saw it for the first time with some media coverage, instantly I was rocked to my core, and I felt like I was carrying a burden for people I did not know. Anytime it was revisited, like on an anniversary or something, and then if the dust came up again, I would watch it tops to tails, whatever the reporting was. Even though I already saw them talk about that before, [it was] No, I'm going to watch it again.



After completing Disney's *A Wrinkle in Time*, in the summer of 2018, DuVernay hit the streets of

New York hard to make the late spring release date Netflix had penciled in for *When They See Us*...

Nash: I reached out, as soon as I heard about it. I said, "I have to be a part of this narrative." I was so passionate about it. I would have been anybody. I would have been someone who said, "Step this way, ma'am," just to be in it.

Ellis: I feel that folks who care about black people feel that way all of the time. We feel that helplessness. We know this injustice has happened to these children; what do we do with it? So, the opportunity to be a part of something that I feel is restorative justice for these young men is huge for me.

Nash: Let me just say that I feel like for me the casting of Jharrel Jerome was a gift. You know, I've been in this business a long time. I've worked with a lot of people, but there is something to be said for an immediate connection that I think manifested on camera, in a very real way. I just leaned all the way into that part of it. I have a son and it was easy to look in Jharrel's face and see my own child, you know?

The scenes in prison were very hard on me emotionally, because as a parent, the one thing you want to do is protect your child. But there was no way for me to do that. I couldn't protect him in the court; I couldn't protect him in prison.

Jerome: I took a lot from the script and trusted that Ava got those moments from Korey's mind himself.

In the conversations I've had with Korey, we didn't spend a lot of time speaking about any of his experiences, really. I don't think I've ever heard his own personal opinion on the entire story actually. I just got to know him by who he is today. His aura, his spirit, the way he will see any woman in the street and call them a queen and hug them. The way he matches his clothes with his sneakers and his hats. You know, he's such a youthful spirit, and spending time with him today helped me tap into the younger parts of him mainly.



I think to tap into the older parts, it was a lot of Ava's writing and her spending time with me as a director.

DuVernay: I feel very emotionally connected to anyone who I work with as an actor with my pieces. I feel that I have a responsibility towards them, and they have a responsibility towards me. I respect them and I expect to be respected.

I love actors; I really love them. The things that they do, the things that they put themselves through, even if they are portraying characters. Your same mind, whatever dreams you're pulling from, memories, legacy, study, all that, it's your heartbeat that's on that screen. That is a gift that I feel actors give. So, I've become really tied to them, and sometimes on very special occasions that work, that intimacy that happens on set and while we're working, spills over into real life. That's a joy when it happens.

Ellis: This could have been a cute series, but that's not what this was about because that's not where Ava lives. Her work has intention. I feel like everybody who came to set every day wanted to do the best as they could because they wanted to live up to that intention. We all walked in the door like, Look, we are here to work today, not just to act.

Nash: Ava makes you feel like she is the most connected to you out of everybody else. Then when you see her talking to somebody else, and you can see the connection across the room, you're like, "She connected to them too?"

DuVernay: It's not done purposely, it's just I'm wildly interested in each person.

There were a couple of actors who I just like them as people—their spirit, their energy, their leaning in, their wanting to do it—that I chose even though technically I was going to have to work with them a little bit more. Everyone got up to exactly the place they needed to be, but I really don't cast just on talent, you cast on spirit.

I think the joy of directing for me is I get to handpick each and every person. Who I want to spend the days with, who I want to invite into something that I've already been working on for four years, you know what I mean? So, it is really, really intimate—which is also why I made sure we had support, that we had counselors close by.



Nash: I left with my shoulders low many a day. I remember filming the prison scene where Jharrel's Korey decides he's going to reach across and try to touch his mother, and I'm screaming, "Don't let them break you, Korey." And he's saying, "Mama, come see me more." Our emotions were at a fever pitch, and then it was over and, "That's a wrap tonight for Jharrel and Niecy." What do you do with all of these emotions? We just walked back to the trailer shaking.

Jerome: For me, honestly, Korey himself was my counselor. He was my therapist every time he was on set. It was just needing his presence, needing a smile, knowing that he's OK today, he's alive, he's strong today. That's definitely what kept me grounded in the work and allowed me to go home with a better head on my shoulders. To know that there was a hotline—somebody to call—it was such a safety that I've never felt before on set.

Ellis: Here's the thing: I was playing a character that I believed in. You're not reenacting, you are playing a character, and I honor that. There's where I begin and Sharon Salaam ends, but there's that shared space too.

Mrs. Salaam was a warrior looking for a movement, and unfortunately that movement was her own son. I see her as I see Angela Davis and Assata Shakur; that is what runs through her veins.

I remember we were talking, and I said, "Mrs. Salaam, you know, people talk about this responsibility that black people are supposed to take on, which is forgiving injustice when it happens to them. How do you feel about that?" And she said, "Well, in order for me to forgive, I would have to forget. And in order for that moment of forgetfulness to happen, someone would have to take something and cut it out of my brain." She said, "I live this every day of my life." That changed me. I wanted to do her justice; I wanted to do justice for all of them.

The aftermath of the series' debut saw outrage directed toward those involved in the prosecution and an unrepentant Donald Trump. Emotions remained raw too for cast and crew...

DuVernay: For me personally it was the hardest shoot I ever did. Emotionally, I was depressed through the whole thing. I was in New York working on this material. The cast was massive. I was producing it as well. I was a writer. So many moving parts, but it wasn't anything to do with the work, it was the subject matter.



I remember being in the van one day early in the shoot, and I said to my driver—who was great—“What day is it?” He said, “Tuesday.” I said, “No, what day out of 66 is it?” And he said, “I don't think you want to know.” I said, “Are we in the double digits yet?” He said, “No, ma'am, it's day eight.” And I was like, Oh, God.

But, as it went on, the thing that I learned is that I can endure something that feels like it was unendurable at the time, because the work and the art-making actually nourished me; it kept me going. It was the thing that was waking me up in the morning, was trying to make these men proud.

Nash: You know, I was very much just in it for the men, so when it came out, I was like, Well let's sit back and see what the folks are going to say. The reaction—the intense emotions—really caught me off guard. I know it's hard to see, but I keep saying the same thing to everybody. I said, “If these babies endured this thing, we owe it to them to bear witness. Watch it, muscle through it, figure it out, push through.”



Ellis: I hadn't seen the series until recently; I couldn't handle it. But when it came out, people started saying to me, “I saw it, I saw it,” and I was glad. I don't usually tell people to watch anything I'm in, but I wanted people to see this because I thought it was important. People watched and I was hearing over and over, “Yo, Jharrel Jerome, Episode 4.” I mean, over and over. And when I watched it, it was hard, but it was also so beautiful. I felt like a witness to something incredible.

Jerome: When it came out on Netflix and there was the strong reaction, the positive reaction, and then for the world to appreciate the performance, I was just very, very overwhelmed. I wake up and it hits me, and I shake it off real quick and I just go and do my thing, because it freaks me out. But then on the other side of it, I could not be happier for Korey and the others. I am so damn happy. It's unbelievable that now the world knows their real story.

Nash: The thing that I will never forget, and that has changed me, is looking into the eyes of who we lovingly call the Exonerated Five. Holding them in my arms. Calling them still to check up on them and see, “How are you doing? I just want to make sure you’re doing OK.” That relationship, and being a champion for their wellbeing, is what I will carry until they throw dirt on my face, you know?

Ellis: I believe that art is the most powerful force in the world, period, hands down. To me, what happens in the theater of politics is meaningless—utterly meaningless—because it doesn’t change culture, it doesn’t change hearts, it doesn’t change minds. You change a heart, you change a mind. You are powerful, you are powerful, you are powerful.

So the fact that I was a part of something that changed this country, and the person who occupies the White House was forced to answer for what he did because of this series, that’s what’s going to stay with me—the fact is that I just wasn’t acting, I was a part of work that will be lasting. And that was a part of something that was transformational, I hope.

Nash: I feel like at this point several things have happened; good things. One, people have been made accountable. Two, these boys have gotten an outpouring of love that they never would have gotten. Three, there’s nothing like your reputation, because when people think you’re a liar and that’s what they think, that narrative, it spreads like a wildfire. Now they are really seen for the truth of who they are, and I will never forget that. That will stay with me forever.

Jerome: What sticks for me the most is just to know that we get to walk away from all this, but those men now have a voice. They now have a chance to inspire. They go to this school and go to that school, speak to these kids and people will listen to them. That’s real.

DuVernay: It was important to me, once it was done, to show that real story to the men. I wanted everyone to see it, but especially them because this was about them and their families.



I was on my last legs, but we brought them into Netflix, they watched it and I watched them. I sat behind them in a two-row screening room. I wasn’t watching the screen; I was watching their faces. And their faces were illuminated by the light of the screen. It was incredible just to watch all of them going through all the various emotions, to watch them seeing the other men’s stories, because they didn’t really know what the other friend had gone through.

And then you get to Episode 4 with Korey in prison and, you know, they were on the floor. Literally, at one point, Raymond got up out of his chair and sat on the floor to watch. Korey, too, and they were leaning in.

It was an experience that I'll never have again, because it just can't be duplicated. The real people, you've worked on a story for four years, done this shoot that you thought that you couldn't make it through. You've edited it, you've tried to find a way to keep people interested in a story about five boys of color and injustice enough so that maybe some people will watch it and like it. And you get to the end of it, and they embrace you and they cry, and they say, "You did it." It was that moment that made it all worth it.

Jerome: It's crazy.

Nash: That is crazy. Ava, you did it again.