

Exclusive Interview with the Notable Emmy-Nominated Actress: Tonya Williams

Written by Patricia Turnier
Saturday, 12 April 2014 00:00



Tonya Williams was born in London, England. Her parents are Jamaicans. Her father is a deceased retired judge who used to serve at the Supreme Court for Saint Kitts, British Virgin Islands and most of the Leeward Islands. Her mother is a retired registered nurse. Tonya Williams grew up in their beautiful West Indian island home until the age of one until six. During that time, she started ballet at three years old and piano when she was five. Her parents legally separated when she was six. Ms. Williams moved back to England (in Birmingham) with her mother. There she continued to study ballet and piano. In addition, she started studying tap dancing. At the age of 12, she settled down with her mother in Canada. While in high school, she took a modeling course and when it ended, an agent started to represent her for fashion work and TV. After high school, Ms. Williams took a year off and continued to work as a model and actress. She then auditioned and got into Toronto's Ryerson University in the Drama program. One of the policies of the program was that she could not continue to work in the entertainment industry. After one year at Ryerson, Ms. Williams booked the lead role in the play "Love and Politics". In order to be part of it, she left the Drama program

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and the rest was history.

Hence, Williams' [career](#) as an actress started almost forty years ago. The public started to recognize her in North America for her role as "the milk girl" in the *Wear a Moustache* milk campaign in the seventies when she was sixteen years old. She also worked as a model in the same decade, appeared in commercials and catalogues for reputable brands such as *Sears*

,
Eaton's

and

The Bay

. She was a pageant

[contestant](#). She was crowned Miss Junior Personality and Miss Black Ontario.

After that, she appeared in multiple TV shows such as *Street Legal*, *The Polka Dot Door*, *Boogie!*

(where she danced), and so on. Tonya Williams settled down in L.A. in the mid-eighties and rapidly ended up on popular shows like

Hill Street Blues

,
Matlock

,
Falcon

[Cost](#), *Game a Break*, *Generations*. In 2007, she co-starred with Danny Glover in Clement Virgo's movie *Poor Boy's Game*. She worked with Rob Lowe in 2012 on

the set of *Imperfect Injustice*. She was in *Empire*

of Dirt

which premiered at the 2013

Toronto International Film Festival

. Of course, Ms. Williams is best known for portraying the role of Dr. Winters since 1990 in the soap opera

The Young & the Restless

until 2010.

Dr. Olivia Barber Winters is a physician at Genoa City Memorial Hospital, and a graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Seton Hall University [Medical School](#). She was married to Nathan Hastings, Sr., and then to Malcolm Winters. Ms. Williams became the first actress who played a Black physician in the American television history in a series and probably in

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North America. In addition, she is the one who played the role of a doctor in television for the longest time, which is ground-breaking. Dr. Winters' role defied stereotypes (she was multidimensional: smart, ambitious, beautiful, elegant, etc.). It certainly inspired and resonated with many women all over the world who may not have considered the medical profession as a career in their formative years. When the trailblazing role of Dr. Winters was created, it stirred optimism and pride because it was a new event in TV history. It would be really interesting to have Dr. Winters return to Genoa City in the future and see her become a specialist in a field with still scarcity of females such as radiology, the most lucrative realm for physicians.

In April 2001, Williams took the Canadian entertainment industry by storm, creating the *ReelWorld Film Festival*

[
<http://www.reelworld.ca>
]. Based in Toronto, throughout the years, *ReelWorld*

became an important and rich (in terms of content) film festival in the national scene as well as internationally - with support from people like Robert Townsend, Eriq LaSalle, etc. Thus, Tonya Williams wears many hats: actress, director, founder/president and executive producer for *Wilbo Entertainment*

and founder of now defunct

The Publicity Group

(which had the purpose to identify and provide

~~opportunities~~ ~~show business~~
) between 1997 and 2002 and founder/president of the abovementioned *ReelWorld Film Festival* since 2001.

Ms. Williams is an articulate woman. In addition, philanthropy is important to her. She is open-handed and gives back by consulting people, including aspiring actors, about how they can realistically have a ~~career~~ in the entertainment business. People can contact her through her official website www.tonyaleewilliams.com

. Ms. Williams regularly speaks to groups across North America about her experiences in the entertainment business. In addition, she mentors over 30 talented young hopefuls. She is a strong political lobbyist, utilising her voice to help modify licensing and government policies. Ms. Williams' ongoing advocacy work in the entertainment industry has been recognized by former Mayor David Miller who appointed her to the Toronto Film Board, which she no longer sits.

Each year, the abovementioned *ReelWorld Film Festival* screens films, provides professional panels and honours people in the industry for their outstanding, granting prizes such as the *Trailblazer Award*

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and the

Visionary Award

. TD Bank Group, NBC Universal, CBC, ACTRA, Telefilm Canada, Cineplex Entertainment LP, Global Toronto are among the main sponsors and partners of the festival.

ReelWorld Film Festival

, which will complete soon its 14th year, was usually a 5 day festival – but this year it will have an additional 3 days in the city of Markham, which will partner with Markham's Mayor Scarpitti.

Overall, Tonya Williams has been involved in the entertainment industry since the age of 16. She stands out with her body of work because she played in top shows in the U.S. and Canada.

She made TV guest appearances in *Hill Street Blues* (1981), *Matlock* (1986), *Silk Stalkings* (1991),

Psi Factor, *Chronicles of the Paranormal*

(1996), etc. In addition, she made film appearances in

Spaced Invaders

(1990),

The Borrower

, (1991),

Seventeen

[\(2000\)](#), *Double Wedding* (starring twins Tia and Tamara Mowry) (2010) and the list goes on.

Ms. Williams also has been a guest star in *The Bold and Beautiful* in

2011. Aforementioned, she is best known for her role in CBS's

Young & the Restless

(created in 1973) as Dr. Olivia Winters, which she started in 1990. The soap opera became the venue that catapulted Ms. Williams to an international audience.

The Young & the Restless

is broadcasted daily in several languages in many parts of the world. For instance, the show is called in French

[Les feux de l'amour](#)

.

The Young and the Restless

is the soap opera that I watched the most because I enjoyed the diversity in the casting. The series was truly inclusive. For instance, this is where America and the world actually discovered

[Eva Longoria](#)

in 2001.

Tonya Williams appeared in the 1995 *CBS Soap Break* and in the *Tonya Lee Williams: Gospel Jubilee* that she produced in

2004 for CBC, among other things. She received several distinctions:

NAACP Image Award

for Best Daytime Actress in 2000 and 2002,

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Dr. Bird Award

for outstanding artists of Caribbean ancestry in 2000,

[Harry Jerome Award](#)

in 2004,

TV Cases-Red Ribbon of Hope Award

,

Positive Impact Award

,

Daytime Emmy Award

nominee in 2000 and 2002,

Association of Black Women Physicians Award

,

Actra Award of Excellence

(one of the highest Canadian prizes) in 2005,

Toronto's – Positive Impact Award

,

Howard University's – Legacy of Leadership Award

,

International Women Achievers Award

and the

Martin Luther King Jr. Award

in 2012 bestowed by the

[Black Theatre Workshop](#)

(BTW). Furthermore, she is an

Oshawa Walk of Fame

recipient (2007). She was featured in one of the top National Canadian newspapers like

The Montreal Gazette

. Articles were written about her in

Jet

,

Inside Soap

,

Diversity

, etc. She has been highlighted in

Who's Who in Black Canada

and its website

www.whoswhoinblackcanada.com

,

Who's Who Among African-Americans

,

Soap Opera

[Digest](#)

, Soap Opera Weekly, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun, Flare, Essence, Toronto Life, Hollywood

Reporter

, TV

Guide

, and the list goes on. In 2012, she was included in Canada's Top 25 Immigrants produced by

Canadian Immigrant Magazine

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. Williams is recognized as a Canadian treasure and, as mentioned, she was appointed to the Toronto Film Board among other prestigious positions. On a more personal level, the actress married Robert Simpson in 1983. The couple divorced in 1991. Williams currently lives full time in Los Angeles and goes to Toronto for her festival or when her presence is needed for other events. She enjoys long drives and unplanned trips to Europe.

Tonya Williams was very generous with her time during the following interview. We had the pleasure to speak to her from Quebec last winter. She talked mainly about her professional path and her ReelWorld Film Festival.



PATRICIA TURNIER TALKS TO TONYA WILLIAMS:

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P.T. Who influenced you to become an actress during your youth?

T.W. No one really influenced me to become an actress. I remember I loved tales as a child. Even as a baby, there was never a night when someone did not read me a bedtime story. This was my favourite part of the day. Later in school, history represented my favorite subject, and I loved to envision and visualize these stories as if I was experiencing it.

My mother noticed that when I watched TV, I was engrossed in it – if she called me I wouldn't even hear her – I was fascinated with the lighting and costumes. I was not as drawn to the characters themselves but to the stories. I was not captivated by the individuals with the glamour but I was enticed into the global aspects of the shows. At the time I was not aware that people were doing a job. Even though I started working in the industry when I was 16 years old, it wasn't until I was 19 that I considered it as something I would do for a career. Up until that time I just thought of it as something fun I liked to do – but at 19 years old I auditioned and was accepted into the Drama Program at Ryerson. That's when I really realized how much work this acting requires. Growing up, I was always involved in the arts of some kind. I took ballet, piano, tap dancing, violin as extracurricular activities. As with most Jamaican parents, mine thought it was important to expose me to all kinds of experiences. So, my home environment encouraged my interests in all things educational.

P.T. There is a sub-question which came into my mind: were you free to pick up whatever professions you wanted or was there some kind of influence to choose a liberal profession?

T.W. When my Mother was younger, there were very few opportunities for females. Most women became secretaries, teachers or nurses. My Mother definitely knew she didn't want to be a secretary or a teacher. So, she went to England and pursued nursing. It was very important to my Mother that I find my interests and pursue what I wanted – since she didn't have that opportunity she made sure I did.

My parents divorced when I was 5 and I feel I was free to choose the career that would make me happy. However, I believe that if my father – who was a barrister and then later a Supreme Court Justice – had been an integral part of my life, I mean being with me on a daily basis, maybe the path of my career would have been different. My dad did not have a choice when he was growing up and, perhaps, I would have felt the same. My paternal grandmother told him he had to be a physician or a lawyer. So, my father was more restrictive about the choices of

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children. I carry no memories of my mother telling me what I had to do with my life; she emphasized that being a good person, being productive and happy were the key ingredients to live.

As a child I never thought of acting at all as a career....every week I wished to be something different [chuckles]. If I read an Agatha Christie book, I wanted to be a detective, like Miss Marple, to solve murder mysteries and so on [laughs]. I remember I aspired to be a scientist after reading Frankenstein. I wanted to be a tennis player when I saw Arthur Ashe, I fancied becoming a race car driver, because I loved driving too fast! In this regard, I was like any other child...I was very much a dreamer.

P.T. Earlier, you spoke about freedom. Do you know who else among the celebrities of the Jamaican community raised her son in a free way?

T.W. Who?

P.T. [Grace Jones](#). I heard her once in an interview where she said she never used the word “can’t” when she raised her son. It was not part of her vocabulary.

T.W. How interesting! However, my mother and Grace Jones are probably as opposite as you can get [chuckles]. My Mother is very traditional, and believe me she used the word can’t all the time! – but she wanted me to be a well-grounded child, to know about the world and never to feel limited in my pursuit of a full life. She allowed me to be free in some areas. For instance, when I was 14 and with her at a classical concert, I told her I’d love to know how to play the violin...two weeks later she presented me with this instrument and had me signed up for classes...that was very much my Mother. But, if it was just frivolous things like clothes and parties, she made sure that my head wasn’t obsessed with these trivial things – that being smart was always better than being pretty.

When I was 17, my high school organised a trip to Paris. For my mother, this was something worthwhile – so while many of my other friends’ parents wouldn’t pay the money for this, my Mother would sacrifice for it, since to her this was very important. She knew this opportunity would open my mind to the world. This experience was priceless for my learning and my growth. Every child is different and unique. My mother knew my strengths and weaknesses.

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She could see my nature and guided me. She knew how to bring out the best in me. She encouraged me to be involved in what interested me and got me excited. That made me more productive. She never forced things on me and I believe it was the perfect way to educate me. This might not work for all children – but she knew this was the right way for me.

P.T. When did you realize that you had the skills to become an actress?

T.W. When I was 16, my mother signed me up for a modeling course, not to become a mannequin, but as a young lady, she thought it best I went to a kind of finishing school, and this was the greatest way – to learn how to walk properly, understand fashion, how to take care of my skin, etc. It opened my eyes to how easy it was to bring out the best physically in ourselves while camouflaging our physical weaknesses. The woman who ran the courses was called Judy Welch. She also had an Acting and Modeling Agency. When the course was finished, she asked my mother if she could send me to auditions because she saw potential. My Mom said that if it didn't interfere with my school work and if it was something I wanted to do, she would support that. So, from time to time, I had modeling gigs for *Sears, Eaton's or The Bay*. I also got involved in TV commercials. I did this for a few years still not thinking it could become a career. When I finished high school and I was 18, I knew one thing: I didn't want to go to university at the time. I wanted to take a year off and just live – enjoy life and figure out what my next steps would be. It was during that year I met my first boyfriend. He was totally committed to acting and the craft of performing. He was interested in classical theatre – and spoke non-stop about Shakespeare, Ibsen and Chekov. We poured over drama schools together – ones in England, the USA and Canada. During all of this, I was starting to really understand how incredible Acting was. It was his dream to end up on stage, study acting in London, England, etc. He was the lead of a Shakespeare play at the end of high school. The discussions we had, definitely influenced and nurtured me. This became my awakening that it could be a career and a business. We talked about the schools where I might enroll, and this is how I ended up to Ryerson in the late seventies. Most institutions emphasized on the academic aspect of acting, and I didn't want to be part of that. At Ryerson, they focused on the 'doing' of acting with a pragmatic approach. From day one, we were on that stage and in our leotards working professionally, and I believe that is the best way to work the craft of acting. It was like being in a theater company. We studied plays and characters.

Overall, I believe a series of events guided me in the direction where I am now. I definitely believe in destiny. I am also spiritual and religious. I know that there is always a Holly Spirit which is guiding me. I always felt it since my childhood and I know it is still there at the age of 55.

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P.T. I can't believe that you are 55. It makes me think of the popular quote: "Blacks don't crack" [laughs out loud]. This is Black beauty!

T.W. [chuckles].

P.T. It is interesting to hear you talk about destiny because this morning, when I was thinking about this interview, I thought that *The Young & the Restless* is among the few soaps that remained. So many got cancelled. Fate made you stay in one of the top American soap operas for decades. In fact, *Y&R* is recognized as the number-one rated, longest running daytime drama in American history.

T.W. Absolutely! Moreover, if I hadn't met my boyfriend, I probably would not have taken that road. So, in my case there was not really a specific moment that made me realize I had to become an actress. It was more a combination of factors. I guess I was lucky because I didn't have a career plan. I focused on the present most of the time and it served me well. In this regard, I reiterate there was not a specific moment that made me think my destiny would be to become an actress. There is a saying that goes like this: "*If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans*".

P.T. You probably met naysayers during your pathway, what gave you strength not to be deterred by them?

T.W. Fortunately, what people say to me does not impact me either way – whether the comments are negative or positive. In my opinion, everyone has a perspective. I think it's important for people to express their views but I just don't believe it's that significant for the people listening to take them to heart...even if the comment is a compliment – does it matter? It's only important that you continue to do what you know is right for you – and the opinions of others on this matter are not relevant.

I don't see my career as an actress like my entire identity. Acting only represents a piece of a pie of my journey on this earth. So, having this viewpoint definitely helped me to focus on what is important. My career and other people's opinions do not define me.

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I am paid well, but people tend to forget that a huge part of what I undertake does not bring me money, like going to auditions, which is work in itself. In addition, as an actor you prepare more than most people do for a job interview. We receive tons of pages of dialogues that we have to learn, memorise, and perform. In other words, we need to understand the role, prepare ourselves, be at ease with the character we are portraying and deliver a performance.

Part of the job for us as actors is to invest a lot of money in ourselves – even submitting our auditions requires us to pay for our tape auditions which are then sent to the casting directors who request them. It's also part of our work to be in contact with casting directors, producers, directors, agents – networking is a vital part of this entertainment industry. It can be exhausting. I need to be aware on a regular basis of what projects are out there which require research, and so on.

P.T. I am also sure that your morals played an important part with your choices for future roles.

T.W. Absolutely! It is really interesting that you are bringing this up because it represents a very relevant question to me. It symbolizes a dilemma that I have been struggling with during the last five years. When my career started to take off in the late seventies and early eighties, it was much easier for me to set limits. It was clear to me that I would not do nudity, and so on. When you watched the shows at the time, like *Good Times*, the *Brady Bunch*, etc., morals were not an issue compared to now. The standards were different back then. Now, we see a lot of work with morally poor content. So, I love your question because there is a lot of stuff out there that I decided not to go for, and this decision shortened my options. This means that I might need to change direction professionally in the future. It happens that I receive scripts where I would have to portray questionable characters. I have to turn them down. It also happened that I was more drawn to other parts in scripts, even if they were smaller. I like to focus more on quality, which continues to be a very important factor for me. Nevertheless, I have to admit that it does not always make it an easy choice because it is great to be the lead in a show, for instance. However, it is more crucial to me to respect my principles.

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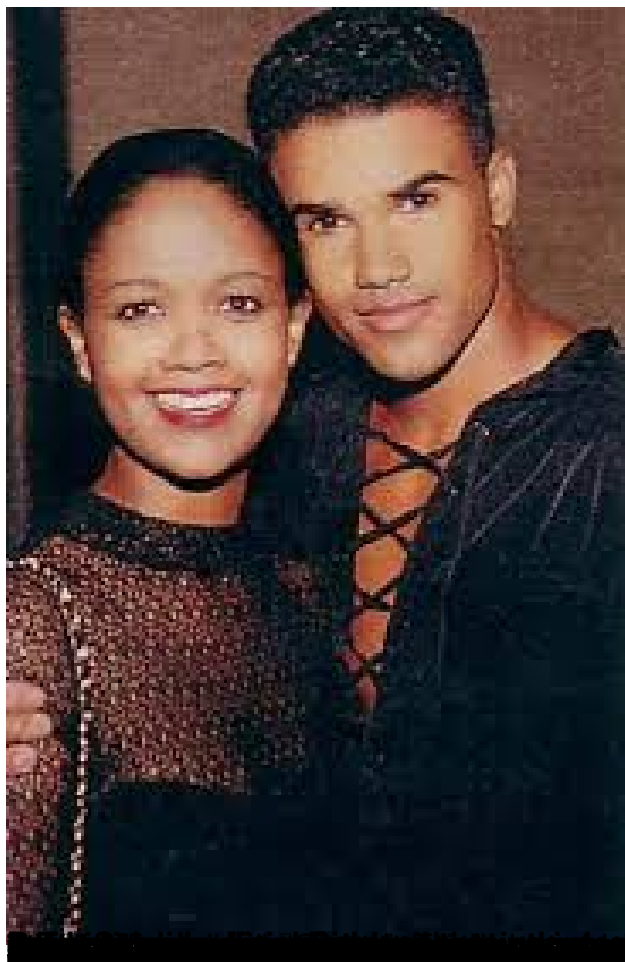
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