

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN ON ROSA PARKS: THE UNTOLD STORY

LAURA FLANDERS- When Nobel Peace Prize winner, Nelson Mandela, came to the United States after his release from prison, he visited Detroit. There he was greeted by a long line of dignitaries and political big wigs. But Mandela rushed past all of them to embrace one person, Rosa Parks. It's a remarkable scene captured in a new documentary about Mrs. Parks, which is streaming this month on NBC's streaming site, Peacock. While Rosa Park is best known to Americans today, I think, as a sort of national treasure, the little old lady who sat down on a bus and, as the RNC once infamously tweeted, "ended racism in America," the documentary directed by Yoruba Richen and Johanna Hamilton tells a much, much fuller story. Based on the book by the same name by Jeanne Theoharis, this first ever full length doc about Parks shows her to be what Mandela clearly recognized, namely a tireless global freedom fighter. "The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks" premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival this summer and is rolling out with a comprehensive curriculum for schools. It was executive produced by today's guest, the award-winning journalist, author, and philanthropist, Soledad O'Brien and Soledad O'Brien Productions. Welcome back to the program, Soledad. It is so great to have you.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Thank you so much. Nice to see you.

LAURA FLANDERS- Congratulations on the film. I had to keep pinching myself that this was really the first ever full-length doc about Parks. Hard to believe really, isn't it?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, it's so hard to believe, isn't it? It actually just sounds completely not true. But I think that's part of this idea that everybody thinks they know the story of Rosa Parks. They get it! One day, kind of accidentally, she refused to give up her seat. And yes, at the end of that entire thing there was a boycott, and then eventually the boycott was ended and there was some legal stuff that happened. She ended racism. The end! And so I think because we don't really know the story of Rosa Parks, it's very easy to believe that there have been 10 docs done on Rosa Parks, and everybody knows that story, which of course is just not the case.

LAURA FLANDERS- So when Yoruba and her co-director brought this project to you, why did you think it was so important to do right now?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, for a couple of reasons. Johanna Hamilton and Yoruba Richen were in contact with the author of the book by the same name. And I think it was Johanna who said that she always found it so fascinating when the author would tweet about Rosa Parks. And she kept thinking like, "I didn't know that. I didn't know that. I didn't know that." And I think it was one of those, as horrible as social media can be, Twitter friendships that developed into

something important. And so I think for all of us, it was this sense of like, oh my gosh, there's so much we didn't know. Who knew that Rosa Parks was a fan of the Black Panthers? Who knew that Rosa Parks was a fan, as much of a fan of Malcolm X as she was of Dr. King. And I think in the narrative that we have, she was tired, her feet hurt, she didn't get up, there was a boycott, there was some legal stuff, it all ended and racism went away, it leaves out, well, what actually happened to Rosa Parks at the end of the boycott? And in all seriousness, we know that she never was able to work again in Montgomery. She and her husband couldn't work again. We had this tax return that showed that they made just under \$700 one year. I mean, they were really in poverty. And what happened? How did the woman who's the mother of the movement suddenly get sort of ignored by people who were making money off the movement in speeches? She was constantly on the road. How is it possible that someone like Rosa Parks, who played such an important role, also was kind of left out of the narrative? And that the important piece of she never worked again. In fact, racism was not solved. In fact, there were many more obstacles to go through. She had to go to Detroit where she continued her fight in some very rebellious kinds of ways. So it's just another indication of how far that narrative strays from the facts of the case, if you will.

LAURA FLANDERS- So here's the trailer from the film, "The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Parks," which makes very clear just how far the conventional narrative strays from the facts.

[Rosa Parks]- I felt that I had a message, but people did not choose to listen to what I was saying.

- [Contributor] We all understand that she'd sat down on the bus.

- [Rosa Parks] The policeman, he said, "Why don't you stand up?" I said, "I don't think I should have to stand up!"

-[Contributor] - The narrow narrative of her just on one day did something, couldn't be further from the truth.

-[Contributor] Often the man is out front and you never hear about the wife. Yet the reverse is true.

- [Contributor] She was considered a threat.

-[Contributor] Espousing radical views.

- [Contributor] If they could see her talking about the Republic of New Africa there out there with the Panthers, then they would understand the real Rose Parks. But they might have been just a little frightened.

- [Contributor] She has been an activist for over three decades.

- [Contributor] For Ms. Parks, it was especially dangerous.

- [Contributor] Fighting on issues that are still very much at the forefront.

- [Contributor] She never gave up. She lit the torch to the next generation.

LAURA FLANDERS- Talk a bit about how you think, and it's a big question, but how do you think things might be different, our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement, our understanding of women in the Civil Rights Movement, our understanding of what it is to be an activist and to make change, how any of those things might be different if we did get a fuller picture of people like Rosa Parks.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- I'm always curious why people love that narrative of the accidental Civil Rights activist, right? Just one day. Just happened. Wasn't even planning on it. It just happened. Then of course, when you know her whole story from the time she's a small child until her death, her activism was in her blood. It was in fact not accidental. It wasn't just something that happened around her on that one day. And so I think it really explains how you have to fight for civil rights and a lot of things, right? It's a long game of trial and error and going back and going back and losing sometimes. I mean, there's a point where Rosa Parks is assigned to go take the testimony of Recy Taylor, a woman who's been raped by poor white men. They tell her, "If you tell anybody, we'll kill you!" And she knows she's not gonna get any kind of legal repercussions to happen. So she's telling her story to Rosa Parks, who's gone out quite a far away in a rural area to get her story. A police car driving back and forth. And I've always been struck by that, like this idea of like the victim knows, Recy Taylor knows she's getting no justice. Rosa Parks is there taking the dictation of what happened. She knows there will be no justice. And yet both of them are there saying like, but it actually matters. A record matters. The truth matters. Having a record of what happened, maybe it won't make a difference here, but at some point it does make a difference. And I always love that part. Like she was so involved to put herself. I mean, it was obviously a very risky thing to do. But also to just care enough. Like I'm going to go and take a testimony of a thing that I know in my lifetime most likely will never be righted. And there she is anyway. And I've always just found that very remarkable.

LAURA FLANDERS- Well, that I think is what I bring to my work in journalism, and you too. It's like there are so many activists out there, so many regular people out there, who are willing

to take such risks to tell their story. The responsibility then on us journalists has to at least match that or partner with it to some degree. Do we think we're doing that job? Are we doing it more, better? I mean, there were journalists at the time, mostly African American, working for Black papers in the day who were covering the Civil Rights Movement in a whole different kind of a way. But for white reporters to cover that story, it took a lot. As we've said, it took decades even for this story to get told, and it's such a great one.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- I think people are trying. I do think that whenever the platform changes, so whenever suddenly white journalists realize that the Civil Rights Movement was a thing, and it became a big thing, then sort of the platform kind of opened up its aperture and everybody saw these other things happening. And I think that's happened today with social media that these things happen and they don't go unnoticed. Suddenly somebody says, "Oh my gosh, this is happening over here on social media." And then they start reporting on it and telling it. A good example would be the parents after the school shooting in Uvalde. This idea of like, oh, well, they're saying something different. If you read through what they're writing and what they're posting and what they're saying, it's not the line that matches what the police are saying. It's actually very different. And so I do think we are getting better because there's more access and we're being held more accountable and there's more ways to get that information. But I mean, you know as well as I do, early on in any kind of police involved shooting, let's call it that, that there was one version, and that usually came from the police put out a press release. And then I was one of the journalists who pretty much dutifully, "Police say just after 7:00 PM, a man in a brown car," da da, right? Like, that was the job. And now I think we understand like, oh, there's probably more sides to this and how do we tell this story without hearing from anybody or trying to get more versions of what happened.

LAURA FLANDERS- Did you say you were the journalist who did that kind of notation?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Absolutely. Listen, one of my jobs when I was in local news, we did the perp walk. And you realize that the perp walk was... Here's why the perp walk was helpful if you're a journalist. If you're opening lines need to be, "John Robert Stevens," da da da duh, right? Is that someone's real name? No, I don't think so.

LAURA FLANDERS- Let's hope not.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- It's a hypothetical, people. I probably should use someone I know. Gonna be mad at me. But you need seven seconds of video, and a perp walk covers that very nicely, right? Boom, boom, boom. We see the guy walking. We say the name. Gets me into my story. But often the perp walk was faked. That person was already booked and incarcerated. They would just take him out, walk 'em around the building. Journalists, it was very helpful. Thank

you. But you realize as you grow up, and as I eventually, we're like, "Oh my gosh! "I'm contributing to a system where like this is not okay! "This is not good!"

LAURA FLANDERS- It is a crazy time to be a political reporter. You can't just keep saying they're lying, they're lying, they're lying. But you kind of have to keep saying they're lying, they're lying, they're lying about some of the candidates that are out there. Not all. What's your advice to people reporting this election story who perhaps wanna do something different or do it differently?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- If I came on your program and lied every time and later your fact checkers are like, "Oh my God, she made up so much," you would just not have me back. You would literally say, "It's disrespectful to me, "as a journalist, to have her on the show. "She just makes stuff up. "It's not okay!" And I think you can do that with politicians. And there's a difference between spinning and overt lying. And I think that anybody who overtly lies to you as you have 'em on as guest should not be invited back. They do not deserve to be on any kind of program. And unfortunately, I have seen so many people, we know they're saying lies, and that they're invited back and welcomed back. So I think that's problematic. I also think that you can call out and highlight hypocrisy if there are senators who vote who talk about aid for their state in the wake of a hurricane, but then vote against that very aid. I think that's an important point. That's a headline. And highlighting hypocrisy is really important. So there are ways to do it. I don't think you have to love the person you're covering. I don't think you have to hate the person you're covering. I think you can just be very straightforward and honest about it.

LAURA FLANDERS- Let me go back to Rosa Parks for a second. Jeanne Theoharis, who wrote the book on which the documentary is based, is fond of saying that to present Rosa Parks as this kind of national treasure is to demand nothing of us. But to tell the more complex story of Mrs. Parks, as you do in this documentary, does demand something. Can you talk about that a little bit? What perhaps damage does the sort of pacification of 'treasure-ness' do to some of our radical leaders?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, I think I would say, if you know all that you know, it could make you feel a certain way, right? Like if, you know... Would George Bush be giving her an award if everybody knew that she palled around with the Black Panthers? Would she have a statue in the capital if people knew that she respected Malcolm X tremendously and she thought "by any means necessary" was by any means at all? I don't know. I don't know that would've happened. And so I do think it does ask a lot of us, because we are made uncomfortable and we have to figure out in our head how do we hold these things. So she looks like a little grandmother, but she was not. And you just have to ask yourself about the whole woman and not just this tiny little sliver in time. You have to ask yourself, how is it possible that she lived in poverty? How is it possible that she was both the mother of the movement and no one cared enough to see if she

was gonna survive and have work after the movement, or her part of the movement? So yeah, I think they're tough questions and they ask you to be uncomfortable, and we don't like to be uncomfortable.

LAURA FLANDERS- Do we report women, especially women of color, worse than other people?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, I think generally. I mean, I think there's no surprise that women were left out of the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. I mean, even those women who were really support staff, who cooked and organized and did kind of background stuff, often didn't even get credit for the background stuff that they were doing. And the women who were in the foreground doing a lot of work didn't even get any credit at all either. So it's not a surprise to me. I think there's been a fair amount written about that and I like that people recognize it because I think it's one of those things that then you work to reinsert people's names into history, to remind everybody, oh, nope, let me just remind you, no, this is how it really was.

LAURA FLANDERS- In one of the reviews I saw, one of the articles about the documentary, it was pointed out that the statue of Rosa Parks was unveiled on the very same day that the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in Shelby versus Holder, the case that ultimately took federal oversight, the Justice Department, out of the Voting Rights Act.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- We love-

LAURA FLANDERS- Irony!

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- And we love to live comfortably with complete hypocrisy. People will totally not understand and be completely fine with the fact that every single thing that Rosa Parks was fighting for, that was won, was actually to a large degree lost on that very day where people were celebrating her life and her actions. I mean, it's just tremendously hypocritical. And I think, again, we don't like to be uncomfortable. Sometimes you feel like you're the party pooper, right, pointing out like this was happening at that moment where everyone's saying the loveliest, nicest things. They were literally dismantling her life's work.

LAURA FLANDERS- But I can't let you go without asking you a little bit about how you got to where you are and maybe who helped to get you to where you are. I see you're now referred to as a trailblazer, the OG. I dunno how you feel about any of that.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- There was a time when I was like 40 under 40s, and then-

LAURA FLANDERS- It happens! Sooner or later you'll be a treasure. Watch out!

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- I can be a treasure and the legacy award winner. Yeah, I will say I think one of my biggest strengths is that I've always been very good at finding mentors. And a lot of the advice... My husband and I run a small foundation, we send girls to school, and I'm often telling them like, be open to feedback and be open to people who will mentor you. Maybe they mentor you for a day, maybe they mentor you just for a month or six months, or they become lifelong mentors. But I think you can really learn a lot from a lot of people. And I was very lucky. I had a ton of people who just gave me great advice. And then some people whose lives either inspired you or scared the crap out of you, where you're like, oh, I never wanna do that. I will not do that! So yeah, I'm a very good sponge of that stuff and it's the advice I give. Like learn from everybody. Everybody has something to teach you.

LAURA FLANDERS- Which reminds me that you've actually developed a whole curriculum around this film and your planning screenings in schools or for school groups. How will that play out? What can people do? And why did you think that was important to do?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Because I don't think you could talk about changing a narrative and then ignore an entire generation of young people who are gonna be taught the same things that we were taught. Jeanne Theoharis, the author, is doing that work for us as well. So we're really excited to continue to work with her. She's remarkable. And bring that story to the real story, the accurate story.

LAURA FLANDERS- It is striking to be reminded of just how hard it is to do the work she was doing. We sometimes get, I think particularly in our fairly unidimensional social media world, heroes and villains as you mentioned, sort of celebrities and everyone else to remember just how hard it is to do this work and how long it takes I think is comforting for activists out there and young people wondering about their lives.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, it's a journey. It's a real long... I mean, and that's the fact. It is not a one-day event. It is not a short term accidental. Civil rights is a battle. It is a fight and you have to continue to work on it for your entire life.

LAURA FLANDERS- And you get a bunch of grief.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, at every step. Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS- We have some opportunities to invite viewers and listeners to engage with your project. What's the best way for them to do that?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Great. We're running on my Twitter, we're running clips of the doc. So that's @SoledadOBrien, one word. And it's going to stream on NBC's Peacock network, their streaming service, on October 19th. So check it out.

LAURA FLANDERS- You have had an amazing career and I appreciate you being out there in the world. I also particularly appreciate you having started your own multimedia independent production company. Can you tell us a little bit about why, why now, and how it compares to the work you've done in the past, usually at the employ of different networks?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, you know, I have really enjoyed it. Although the first, this is our, we're going into our 10th year.

LAURA FLANDERS- Congratulations.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Our first two years were hard because you call yourself a CEO, but what does that mean exactly? And what is your mission and what are your values, and what do you wanna do, and what do you wanna create? And as we have had some tremendous successes in the projects that we pick, are very much what I think is important. We have a doc streaming on HBO called "Black and Missing," which looks at all the missing Black women and why the media and why the law enforcement often don't seem to care very much. So I think it's the questions that I have and projects that I want answers to.

LAURA FLANDERS- And the answer the Independent Spirit Awards gave Soledad and her team was their prize for Best New Non-scripted Documentary Series.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- I think this series proves that people care about these stories, and not just Black people. All people care about the stories that are often ignored and go untold and undertold because it's about the humanity of the people that you profile. And so I think journalists and storytellers generally have a tremendous opportunity. I remember pitching to an executive at CNN right before I left. Said, "We should do a doc called Poverty in America "and really look at the changing face "of what poverty is here." And he said, quote, "Ew! Who'd wanna look at that?" And I was just like, and I should go! Because I think that's important.

LAURA FLANDERS- Well, that brings us back to the audience question, because the CEOs of the networks will say that exact point and they'll say, "Look at the ratings." And we can't always promise the docs about the face of poverty will get great ratings.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- I can promise you the doc I do on the face of poverty would get great ratings, partly because a lot of that is about promotion. It's about talking to people and letting them know where they can see it. And I think it's an important issue. I mean, we had the same

issue when we did "Black in America" for CNN. There was a real worry. You have a overwhelmingly white audience. You're calling it "Black in America." One executive said, "Don't make it too black!" which is kind of funny. But I get it, right? They're saying don't scare away our main audience, please. And you know what, we grew the main audience, we grew the white audience, and we grew the Black audience. Because often I think what they think is gonna happen is just completely wrong. This idea that two congressmen yelling at each other is good TV is a farce. It's not! I know because I compete with the shows that do that and we win. We beat them by a lot. People want to understand. They want to understand breaking news. Our top-rated show, for Matter of Fact, was about the Puerto Rican grid being in such terrible shape that people were going out on their own to build their own solar systems. Like could you imagine going into a newsroom and saying like, "Oh, do I have a story! "Okay, stay with me for a second. "The grid!" Of course not! 2 million people watched that show. And so I think the things that we think are compelling, the drama, the fighting, the infighting, are not! People are like, I actually wanna understand what's happening. Can someone explain gerrymandering, please? When the president is sworn into office, what exactly is he swearing to? I'm not sure I know! And we have been able to build a pretty successful show out of that because we don't wanna do the yelling thing. So you need a lot of people around you who also wanna do that show. But I think often they're just wrong about what they think works.

LAURA FLANDERS- We always end every episode by asking people what they think the story will be that the future tells of now. And I dunno whether you've had a second to think about that. But the story the future might tell of this moment, perhaps in journalism, what do you think?

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Yeah, I think the story is going to be that journalists were very challenged, but some people were able to really force them to do some self-examination. That's my biggest frustration. People don't wanna say, gosh, did I do it wrong? I talk about mistakes I made all the time. I don't mind. I'm happy to... I did them! They exist on tape somewhere. Like, it's okay. Let's fix it. Let's get better from it. And I think we just need more introspection. So I hope the story is, you know what, they really recognized that the world was shifting and they decided to change.

LAURA FLANDERS- I appreciate that. Soledad O'Brien of Soledad O'Brien Productions. Great acronym. We will be back in touch, I'm sure. Well, I just need to say goodbye. Thank you so much.

SOLEDAD O'BRIEN- Thank you for having me. Nice to see you, as always.

LAURA FLANDERS- So this is another time in which much of the conversation we couldn't fit into the show. Soledad O'Brien had a lot to say about access. Maggie Haberman's book had just come out about Donald Trump, the "Confidence Man." And we talked about what reporters in

Washington trade for access to the politicians they cover. As I thought about that since, I thought about Barbara Harris, the veteran reporter and writer for "The Jackson Advocate" in Mississippi. Barbara Harris Johnson passed away not so long ago, way too young, but she always talked about access. The question was not about how much of it you had, but who did you have access to? Black reporters covering the Civil Rights Movement, she said, had no access to any agency of power. That was all in white hands. What they could cover, and did with extraordinary acuity, was the movement for civil rights rising in their own communities where they lived. They built that story into one that the national press picked up. Did they have access to power? It depends how you define power. The people they had access to changed the world. You can find my full uncut conversation with Soledad O'Brien if you're a subscriber to our free podcast, You'll get it every week. All the archives are at our website. Thanks for joining me. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura.

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