

A black and white portrait of Suzanne de Passe. She has long, wavy hair and is wearing a white, collared shirt. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a soft expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Vineyard Girl

Hollywood heavyweight **Suzanne de Passe**
still yearns for the simplicity of her childhood

BY WILMA ANN ANDERSON

When Suzanne de Passe walks through airports, people can sense right away that she's "somebody." Maybe it's her elegance and grace, that unmistakable "presence" she exudes. When folks identify her, inevitably it has something to do with Motown, such as "the Motown Lady" or "the woman from the Michael Jackson documentary."

For the record, de Passe is the CEO of the Los Angeles-based de Passe Entertainment Group, LLC, and is the creative force behind a slew of hit television movies and shows, such as *"The Jacksons: An American Dream,"* *"Lonesome Dove,"* *"The Temptations,"* and *"Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever."* She has been called the second most important African-American woman in television, behind Oprah Winfrey.

De Passe was born in New York City in 1947 and grew up in a place that many people know only as a tourist destination—Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. The Vineyard nurtured her love for islands and a relaxed approach to life. It likely has a lot to do with one of her current choices as a favorite place to visit: the Caribbean island of Anguilla. Compared to many of its Caribbean contemporaries, Anguilla is relatively undeveloped, with calm beaches, heavenly cuisine, and serious peace and quiet. Visitors to Anguilla become such a part of the life of the island that you can wake up in your small hotel on a Sunday morning and hear a choir singing in an open-air church.



“The Vineyard nurtured her love for islands and a relaxed approach to life. It likely has a lot to do with one of her current choices as a favorite place: Anguilla.”

Travel is a constant in de Passe's life. Her aides have been known to describe her travel schedule as "dramatic." Her projects have lured her to disparate lands like Vancouver, Santa Fe, Calgary, and South Africa. That last one made quite an impression.

"Traveling to South Africa made me appreciate what I have because apartheid was so oppressive," de Passé says. "But South Africans have dealt with it more honestly than Americans have dealt with slavery."

It's clear that location, location, location truly informs the perspective de Passe lends to every project. But being on location can rob this super producer of the homemade elements that ground her, so she tries to create a little bit of that sensibility while away from home.

Private jets and lush hotels are by no means beneath her, but Suzanne likes simple things such as a kitchen, space to spread out, and a desire to "feel organically connected to the place," making her feel less like a visitor.

Interestingly, that's how her projects make us feel. The little girl from Martha's Vineyard has

grown into a woman and consummate professional who's learned how to make us all feel organically connected to the persons and situations depicted through film and television, giving us a little slice of home.

De Passe's career began at Motown Records as Creative Assistant to the company's founder, Berry Gordy. She rose to the position of President of Motown Productions and later formed Gordy/de Passe Productions with Gordy prior to establishing her own company in 1992.

From a professional vantage point, she's conquered the "man's world" of film and TV. She received an Academy Award nomination for co-writing, *"Lady Sings the Blues"*—one of only two African Americans to receive an Academy Award nomination for screenwriting—was Executive Producer of the long-running series "Sister, Sister" and "Smart Guy," and currently serves as Executive Producer of the syndicated program, "Showtime At The Apollo." In 2005, she served as

Executive Producer of *"The Black Movie Awards,"* which was nominated for an NAACP Image Award and NAMIC Vision Award. Her bragging rights include being the recipient of two Emmy Awards, six NAACP Image Awards, three Peabody Awards, and a Golden Globe.

Without question, de Passe can wear her medals on her sleeve and beat her chest, but that would not reflect the grace she's learned from her journey to becoming a pioneer in media. When asked about that journey, she reflects, "In the early stages it was tough to develop my own effective persona. The challenge was to galvanize people's support and engage them enough to work with me. I had to set an example and sometimes pull rank."

Pull rank? Take orders from a woman? Well, most

folks in Hollywood have been doing it since birth so it is not a novel concept. And because of the impact of women like de Passe, folks in Hollywood will need to get used to doing it. Taking orders from a higher power is something de Passe had to learn herself. As a little girl, she dreamed of marriage, kids

and the proverbial white picket fence, but her cards were shuffled into a divinely different order. And in the true form of a leader, she welcomed the change and turned it into an opportunity to make a mark in a stubborn and sometimes unforgiving industry.

De Passe believes everything is in Divine order, and to experience this order one has to be still and stay spiritually connected. Though she has always been fond of magazines, books, film and television, it's the quiet time that renews her. Even now, she takes about a half hour each day for what she calls "soul food" time when she reads, meditates and prays. When she's not on a production, Suzanne kicks back in her standard uniform of jeans and a sweatshirt and enjoys doing what "regular" folks do: taking care of her home and curling up with a good book.



de Passe makes a point at Odyssey Network Conference, as Bishop Vashti McKenzie and astronaut Mae Jemison look on.

Wilma Ann Anderson is a New Jersey-based writer and the co-founder of the online magazine MahoganyBaby.com.