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'Drylongso' - Cauleen Smith's Bittersweet Tale

Varner, Sandra. **Oakland Post** [Oakland, Calif] 11 Aug 1999: 8.

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Abstract (summary)

She seems too young to have such a grasp on the veteran art of storytelling. But, her work speaks volumes about her abilities. I am referring to emerging filmmaker [Cauleen Smith] whose first feature length film, "Drylongso," debuted last week as part of the "Representing Soul" minifestival on the Sundance Channel (check your local cable carrier for details). Described as a presentation of exceptional and original films covering a diverse range of subjects, styles and viewpoints, Smith's project is included among other works by African American historian John Henrik Clarke, noted director Ernest Dickerson and actor/comedian/filmmaker Keenen Ivory Wayans among others. ("Drylongso" encores Aug. 12 and 24.)

"Drylongso" is said to be a traditional term from the African American culture meaning "ordinary" or "the same old thing." I've typically, though rarely heard the expression used differently. Smith's film which she wrote and directed follows the everyday life of Pica (Toby Smith), a bright, talented and determined college photography student. Asked to complete a class assignment using 35mm film, Pica instead chooses to use a Polaroid camera that produces snapshots within a few seconds. Pica feels this method is less intimidating given there are no negatives floating around, since her project chronicles young black men, a perceived endangered species.

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She becomes acquainted with and befriends Tobi (April Barnett) an attractive yet, repressed young woman, who has been physically assaulted during a date, leaving her emotionally scarred. Tobi chooses to mask her feminine beauty and goes around dressed like a hardened boy. As Pica and Tobi discuss their views on men, we also see an interesting contrast to their relationships with their mothers. Pica's mother appears to have under developed parenting skills, while Tobi's mother has a greater attachment to her career which sends her traveling around the world.

"Drylongso" goes against the common convention of high concept, block buster films lending itself to the purest independent art form: slow paced, simple yet, interesting characters, layered in subtle complexities.

I spoke with Smith about "Drylongso" over tea at a Jack London Square cafe in Oakland.

Q. Tell me how "Drylongso" came about.

A. I've been making short, experimental films...about six of them. **Drylongso** was originally to be a short. As I embarked on a grant writing campaign to produce the project (which took 3 years), the commitment to the characters gave birth to a longer story. The story is not about African American men, rather, it is a story about young African American women.

Tobi becomes empowered by her traumatic experience manifest in her outward expression, dressing as a man. Usually, women are so victimized in stories, I just wanted this girl to come out as being empowered by her experience.

Q. As a young black woman in a male-dominated industry you are now empowered with this project. How does it feel?

A. Not very many black women are making films in Hollywood. There are many challenges to getting work done. I have been very fortunate because I was able to produce a feature length story which was shown at the Sundance film festival.

Q. In classic independent film fashion, "Drylongso" cost under \$80,000, financed through grants and credit cards - reminiscent of actor/filmmaker Robert Townsend's first feature, "Hollywood Shuffle."

Indeed very few filmmakers get the opportunity to produce a commercially accepted project let alone make it in their hometown. Describe that experience?

A. The West Oakland community was so supportive and engaging. We filmed everything in Oakland, principally in West Oakland. They (the residents) served as extras and doubled as security - we had no problems at all - during the filming process we often left the house unlocked. The neighbors really felt invested in the project.

A graduate of San Francisco State's film department, Cauleen Smith now lives in Los Angeles.

Under the creative direction of Robert Redford, Sundance Channel brings television viewers independent features, documentaries, shorts, animation and international cinema, running uncut and commercial-free 24 hours a day. Sundance Channel launched in 1996, and is a joint venture among Robert Redford, Showtime Networks Inc. and PolyGram Filmed Entertainment.

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