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## Oaklander's Film Well Received At Sundance

Urbani, Diane D. **Oakland Post** [Oakland, Calif] 10 Feb 1999: 8.

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### Abstract (summary)

"Our PR strategy is to pack the house with as many friends as possible," said a smiling Smith, 31. When the youthful filmmaker stepped up to the podium, cast and crew raised their hands and shouted, "Who! Yeah!" The "Drylongso" group was loud and proud, standing in high contrast to other Sundance audiences.

"Drylongso" gives us a glimpse inside the lives of Pica (Toby Smith) and Tobi (April Barnett), whose bus-stop meeting turns into a friendship. Small-boned and beautiful Tobi starts dressing as a man to hide from her abusive boyfriend, Jefferson. Pica, an artist toting only a Polaroid camera, wants to take Tobi's picture and add it to her collection of African American male faces. Believing they are "an endangered species" and wanting to record their humanity, Pica photographs just about every black man who crosses her path. In college she's learned the staggering rates at which young black men are killed or imprisoned. Pica has been to seven funerals in the past year -- all for young men from her neighborhood.

"Everyone told us not to go into Oakland and shoot a film," said [Salim Akil]. Then "people made us cakes, cooked us dinners... we never had to lock the doors of the house" where "Drylongso" was filmed.

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Oaklander's Film Well Received At Sundance

By Diane D. Urbani

Special To The POST

Oakland natives brought a dose of reality to glamorous Park City, Utah, recently. "Drylongso (Ordinary)," a feature film by San Francisco State University graduate Cauleen Smith, noticeably warmed the atmosphere at the Sundance Film Festival, Jan. 21-31.

Shooting the film at Magnolia and 30th Streets in Oakland, Smith, screenwriter Salim Akil and a scant crew told the story of two young women struggling with problems both personal and municipal.

Why Oakland?

"Because I'm from Oakland," was the deep-voiced answer from Akil. His words prompted another round of cheers from the Sundance audience. They'd already yelled and clapped their approval at the end of the movie -- before and after the credits rolled.

"Our PR strategy is to pack the house with as many friends as possible," said a smiling Smith, 31. When the youthful filmmaker stepped up to the podium, cast and crew raised their hands and shouted, "Who! Yeah!" The "Drylongso" group was loud and proud, standing in high contrast to other Sundance audiences.

This is Smith's first featurelength effort. She is earning her master's at the UCLA film school and is "trying to get out of there right now."

"Drylongso" gives us a glimpse inside the lives of Pica (Toby Smith) and Tobi (April Barnett), whose bus-stop meeting turns into a friendship. Small-boned and beautiful Tobi starts dressing as a man to hide from her abusive boyfriend, Jefferson. Pica, an artist toting only a Polaroid camera, wants to take Tobi's picture and add it to her collection of African American male faces. Believing they are "an endangered species" and wanting to record their humanity, Pica photographs just about every black man who crosses her path. In college she's learned the staggering rates at which young black men are killed or imprisoned. Pica has been to seven funerals in the past year -- all for young men from her neighborhood.

The seeds of "Drylongso" grew out of early 1990s hiphop music that pointed out "the endangerment of black men in society," Smith said. With the film, "I also wanted to call attention to the danger many black women are in," the director added.

Tobi knows about that. When she exchanges her slim skirts and high heels for baggy jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and a bandana pulled tight around her head, she becomes free to move around the city without being followed by her former boyfriend. But the temporary transformation brings another change she didn't expect. When she appears as a black woman, other pedestrians "act like the sidewalk is theirs, and when they bump into me, they get mad," she tells Pica.

The same people step aside when they see a young black male approaching. Strolling solo around Lake Merritt, Tobi startles a pair of blondes, by simply walking near them. They veer away and look nervously over their shoulders.

Tobi's boyfriend does find her -- at her house. Jefferson looms in the doorway while Tobi's new male friend calmly tells him, "Say whatever you need to say to her -- from right there." Jefferson walks away.

A woman in the Sundance audience thanked Smith for "breaking down the stereotypes... and not having violence and bad language" in the film. "Drylongso" is about how violent crime affects Tobi and Pica. But instead of graphically depicting attacks, Smith spends most of her 85 minutes showing how the Oakland women contend with them. Pica stages an art show in tribute to the men of her neighborhood; Tobi helps Pica survive the obstacles that nearly silence her.

"Everyone told us not to go into Oakland and shoot a film," said Akil. Then "people made us cakes, cooked us dinners... we never had to lock the doors of the house" where "Drylongso" was filmed.

To an audience murmuring, "Uh huh," Akil added, "oakland is getting its propers today."

The future of "Drylongso" is uncertain. Smith has yet to find a distributor for it. But Keith Williams, an actor and crew member in the film and an art teacher at East Oakland's Havenscourt Junior High School, promised, "My kids are going to see it next week."

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