


THE MONSTER



Runtime: 11 minutes
Category: Comedy

New York, NY
2000 New York Contest Winner

When three boys chat up the new girl on the block, only one gets lucky. He, however, is forced to deal with a secret that not even his closest friends know about.

STUDENT VIDEO GUIDE

Film Topics:

HIV status, communication, and discrimination.

Story Behind the Story:

In addition to schools and community based organizations, Scenarios USA reaches out to youth in jails and prisons, where the rate of AIDS is six-times higher than in the community outside bars. Five incarcerated boys from Rikers Island's Detention Center won Scenarios 2000 NY contest.

In general, the winners of the Scenarios contest are involved in every step of the production process so that the final film is true to the writers' vision. Since the writers of *The Monster* were in jail, the director, Adam Davidson, and writer, John Hamburg, traveled to Rikers Island on a bi-monthly basis to meet with the youth. Adam and John worked with the writers to adapt the script and also brought in tapes of casting sessions and location scouts for the writers input. In fact, the kids kept demanding another casting session because they couldn't agree on a lead actress!



The writers chose a location in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. After a few hours of shooting, Scenarios and the crew were confronted by members of the local neighborhood watch group. When they were told the nature of the project, they immediately welcomed the crew and started helping with the filming.

Scenarios premiered the film on Rikers Island in November 2001 for over 200 teenage inmates and over a dozen crew members from 'The Monster' and the accompanying film 'Nightmare on AIDS Street' attended this screening. ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings featured a segment on 'The Monster,' which included behind-the-scenes footage of the production and interviews with the youth on Rikers.



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STUDENT VIDEO GUIDE (CONT'D)

Writers Bios:

Randy Walton, Naeqwan Clarke, Jarel Turner and Brinton Newson, a group of youth incarcerated on Rikers Island. One of the writers, Randy Walton is very interested in pursuing a screenwriting career. His talents are clear. His entry for the following year's Scenarios contest was the runner up!



Talent Bios:

Adam has made his mark in film, television and theater. Adam's short film, The Lunch Date was awarded the student Academy Award, the Palme D'Or and the Oscar. His full-length feature, Way Past Cool won first place at the San Francisco Black Film Festival. In television, his resume includes Law and Order (for which he received a DGA nomination), The Agency, Monk, The Chronicle and The Invisible Man. His theater experience includes Names, Passive Belligerence and Worldly Acts. As an actor, Adam can be spotted in Daytrippers and stars in the Czech film, Which Side Eden.

Honors:

"The Monster" has been featured in numerous film festivals and was awarded the 2002 Paul Robeson Award for Best Short Film at the 28th Annual Newark Black Film Festival and the Henry Hampton Award for Excellence in Media from the Council on Foundations. The film and the writers were featured on a segment on ABC's World News Tonight. "The Monster" is used in various school districts around the country, including the New York City and Miami-Dade School Districts.



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DISCUSSION GUIDE - QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

1. In the beginning of the film, one friend asks another, “How many digits you got?” Does this sound familiar? How do you think such peer pressure, in both obvious and subtle ways, influences decisions about sexual activity? How can such pressures be handled?

(Note that the young men in the film never talk about why they like particular girls as people, but seem more interested in impressing one another.)

2. When asked, “Why don’t you talk to that girl Chante?” one of the young men says, “Hell no, man, she got the monster!” Why do you think he reacts this way? How do you think this makes his friend James, who is HIV-positive, feel?

(Suggest that James’ friend is afraid because he likely does not have accurate information regarding how HIV is transmitted. Review modes of transmission with the class.)

3. When referring to Chante, he says, “I can tell just by looking at her.” Later in the film, Samantha says to him, “You don’t know me...how do you know I don’t got somethin’?” Can you tell if a person is infected with HIV? What do you think about Samantha’s response?

(Some people who are HIV-positive may have infections that progress to AIDS and may have obvious symptoms such as severe weight loss or lesions. However, most people with HIV cannot be identified by the way they look. Also, if they have not been tested, many people may not know they are carrying the virus.)

4. The young man also says, “It don’t matter whether you wear no jimmy cap...Superman can even get AIDS.” What is your response to this statement? Do condoms work? Can anyone get HIV?

(Inform students that condoms, when used consistently and correctly, are highly effective at preventing sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. It is important to note that anyone who has unprotected intercourse or shares needles can contract the disease.)

5. James is afraid that Samantha will not want to spend time with him because he is HIV-positive. For the same reason, he does not tell his friends about his disease. In what ways do people react when told that a friend is HIV-positive? How could they show support for him or her?

(Recognize that reactions of surprise are understandable, but also note how difficult it can be to share information about one’s disease status with a friend. Point out how ignorance about HIV can lead to prejudice and mistreatment of those who are perceived to be infected.)



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DISCUSSION GUIDE - THROUGH THE LENS OF A FILMMAKER

1. The writers of this film include several young men who were in jail when they wrote the story. What are the benefits and challenges that the director may have experienced when working with the writers under these circumstances?

(Encourage students to discuss the fact that the film provides the opportunity for the general public to hear the little-heard views of incarcerated young men. However, such a project is ideally very cooperative. In this case, a great deal of interaction between the writers and the other people involved in the film was likely very challenging, though not impossible.)

2. What challenges regarding character development must be faced in a short film? Do these writers effectively accomplish this objective?

(Note that the creators of this film adopted the “less is best” philosophy. In such a short film, character development and plot must be clear and well-focused to deliver a strong message.)

3. What role does location play in this film?

(In this film, culture, environment, costuming, and language are all defined by the location. Ask students to think about how using a different location, such as Dayton, Ohio or Phoenix, Arizona, would have changed the film.)

4. How do the writers attempt to capture the voice of teenagers? Are they successful?

(The writers used their understanding of their environment to develop language that is familiar to teenagers, such as the slang words “jimmy cap” and “the monster.”)

5. How are camera angles used to underscore the themes of the film, such as isolation, peer pressure, acceptance?

(Note that James, who is HIV-positive almost always appears alone in any given shot while the other boys are filmed sharing a scene. In the last shot in which James finds supportive friends, however, he is depicted together with the two girls.)



LAYING THE GROUND WORK

The questions contained in this guide are designed to utilize critical thinking and dialogue to promote teenagers' self-awareness and understanding of relationships and sexual health. Working through these questions will provide adolescents with a forum to discuss their own opinions and choices, hear others' viewpoints, and to analyze the behavior of the characters they see in the films. This process will encourage the sharing of valuable information and the development of skills that can help young people make positive decisions that will affect their health and their lives.

Much of the dialogue that is generated may involve sensitive subjects. Therefore, teachers may wish to offer students an **Anonymous Question Box** in which they can insert questions before or after class. If this is done, it is important for teachers to be prepared to recognize, in some appropriate fashion, all issues that are raised and to let students know that

- No question is wrong or silly
- Anyone who contributes a question to the box will remain anonymous, and
- All questions will be addressed, either by the primary instructor or a facilitator who is invited to cover specific issues.

Given the nature of the material, it is useful to introduce **Ground Rules** that may be posted in the classroom. These may need to be referred to regularly, particularly when sensitive issues arise. As an ice-breaking activity, teachers can allow students to develop their own ground rules and help them discuss their importance. Such a list may include the following:

1. **Right to Pass:** We will respect one's choice to abstain from the discussion.
2. **Respect:** We will listen attentively to what others have to say, allowing one person to speak at a time.
3. **Sensitivity:** We will recognize that it may be difficult for our classmates to share stories about themselves and their feelings.
4. **Supportiveness:** We will not criticize other people, although we may disagree with their point of view.
5. **Understanding:** We will be aware that others may differ in their religion, cultural background, or in other ways and we will, therefore, be thoughtful about the comments we make.
6. **Confidentiality:** We will not repeat anything that is shared within the group to anyone outside of the group. While we may talk about the content of the group discussion, we will not identify who has raised a particular issue or who has disclosed a personal story or feeling.

SCENARIOS USA—A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Scenarios USA is an award-winning non-profit organization dedicated to helping youth make smart decisions about their lives by giving them a creative forum to explore who they are and how they see the world. Scenarios USA holds the annual story writing contest called "What's the Real Deal?," in which teenagers in Miami, South Texas and New York City are asked to write and submit stories on such topics as HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, and relationships.

The winning stories, selected by a group of young people, educators, filmmakers, and health professionals are made into short films in partnership with the young writer and a Hollywood filmmaker. Directors who have worked with Scenarios include Doug Liman (*The Bourne Identity*), Michael Apted (*Gorillas in the Mist*), Tamara Jenkins (*Slums of Beverly Hills*), Jim McKay (*Our Song*), and Griffin Dunne (*Practical Magic*). The winning writers participate in all aspects of the production of their stories and attend a premiere of their films in New York City.

The finished products are innovative films used by school teachers, community groups, and after-school programs across the country to facilitate discussion and present information connected to teen sexual health. In addition, Scenarios films have been seen on MTV, Showtime, PBS, and Oxygen. Scenarios has been recognized with Porter-Novelli's Award for Excellence and Innovations in Social Marketing, Council on Foundations Award for Excellence in Film & Digital Media, and numerous honors from film festivals.