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Teen's cinematic vision attracts Hollywood - Acclaimed director takes on Brooklyn gal's provocative script about adolescent moms

By Matt Zeidel

Out at the edge of Coney Island, a teen tells her boyfriend she's pregnant. The catch: he wants to keep the baby, but she's not so sure. If it sounds like the plot of a dramatic film in reverse, that's because it is.

But the 15-minute production, which was shot entirely over one hectic weekend in Sea Gate, is even more unique because of its writer, Tiara Bennett. She isn't a Hollywood veteran with a shelf full of Golden Globes. Bennett is 18, and she wrote the screenplay as an assignment for health class last year while she was a senior at Clara Barton High School in Prospect Heights.

Her script, "The Choices We Make," was the winning entry of a contest held by Scenarios USA, a nonprofit that takes the best teen-written screenplays and turns them into polished, professionally shot and edited short films. Every year, Scenarios USA holds contests in urban Florida, Texas and New York. The winners are aired on TV and cable networks, and used as a kind of hip sex ed in schools across the country.



Photos By Matt Zeidel

The Brooklyn-based organization started nine years ago when co-founders Kristen Joiner and Laura Minsky decided to bring the filmmaking process to "underserved" young people in urban areas. They found inspiration halfway around the world in Scenarios from Africa, which produced scripts entered by sub-Saharan youths.

"We met and both of us wanted to ... engage young people in the arts and social issues," Joiner, who moved to Park Slope a decade ago from Wisconsin, said. Their imported idea was met with enthusiasm around New York, and before long they were able to line up teachers both here and in Texas to participate in the program, a panel of judges and even potential directors. The only thing left to find was funding, and that came a bit harder.

"We begged for money for things we couldn't borrow," Joiner said. "Then we had to borrow from our friends and families."

The money eventually started to trickle in, and with donated film, a borrowed camera and a dolly on loan from the set of "The Sopranos," filming could begin.

Since then, Scenarios USA has received over 7,500 youth-written scripts. Most have been part of the regional contests like this year's, whereas some have been part of nationwide contests in partnerships

with networks like BET. The result of that competition will air on the network this February.

This year, around 300 young people from the five boroughs aged 12-22 entered scripts of 10 pages or fewer, and without a doubt some of them spent a long time on their work.

But when Bennett's health teacher gave the class the assignment and told the students it would be entered into the contest, the first thing Bennett did was ignore it.

"I thought, 'If I do this, I'm going to fail,'" Bennett, now a freshman at Georgia Southern University, said. So she put the assignment off for most of the week, waiting until the afternoon it was due to get her ideas out on paper. In less than two hours, it was done.

"I wanted to write something me and my friends could relate to," she said. "I've had friends who have gotten pregnant, but it's not based on them ... I wanted it to be a reversal of the normal, where the female is unsure and the male wants her to go through with it — instead of saying, 'You should get an abortion.'"

"The story is quite fair about looking at both sides and it brings in both mothers," said Alison Maclean, the New Zealand-born filmmaker who volunteered to direct "The Choices We Make," which will premiere later this spring.

Maclean, who has directed "Jesus' Son" as well as episodes of "Sex and the City," "Homicide" and other TV shows, said that working with Bennett to refine the script for shooting has been a tiring but rewarding experience, and Bennett agreed.

"It's been great. [Maclean] doesn't do anything that I don't want to do, and she's behind me 100 percent," she said.

For Maclean, working on the project has been a departure from what she's used to.

"The community and the situation she's writing about is quite different than what I've seen before. She's from East Flatbush in Brooklyn, and that's a whole different world for me."

Even so, the collaboration between Maclean and Bennett has been close and cooperative.

"She's really open. I haven't had this much opportunity for input," Maclean said. "I think she's really mature, I think she's a natural writer, she writes dialogue very easily and it's pretty real," Maclean said. "To be honest it's been a lot of work. Over the last two to three months I've been working pretty closely with Tiara, helping her to focus and improve her screenplay, which was very good to start with. It's amazing what you can do under pressure."

And "pressure" was the name of the game over the second weekend in January, when the cast and crew worked at a fever pitch to complete filming in just two days and at a handful of locations within blocks of each other in Sea Gate, a beachfront private community that few in Brooklyn even know exist.

The shoot was originally supposed to take place in Bennett's own East Flatbush. But finding a location proved impossible, and even Bennett's apartment was inconvenient.

So when a location scout revealed that he had a friend with a house who was willing to suffer the weekend in the basement, they jumped on the opportunity. The house doubled as two residences; a neighborhood gymnastics center became a clinic; and the beach, with its view of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, became a picturesque spot for contemplation.

Still, there's no pretending it's East Flatbush. But Maclean and Bennett both said the difference was relatively unimportant.

“The house has a lot of windows and it definitely doesn’t feel like an inner-city house,” Maclean said.
“That changes things, but not substantially.”

For more information on Scenarios USA, visit www.scenariosusa.org or call 718-230-5125.

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