Lights! Camera! Handcuffs?

December 1, 2000 By Daniel Vaillancourt

The four screenwriters sit in a circle, flanked by producer and director, debating which lines of dialogue sound most realistic. Just another last-minute script meeting in the movie biz—except that it's taking place under an armed guard's supervision in the prison chapel at New York City's Rikers Island Detention Center, where the three teenage writers are doing time. Getting a picture about HIV into production is hard enough, let alone when most of the talent is behind barbed wire in a maximum-security facility. That's the challenge facing the filmmakers behind The Monster, an AIDS short cowritten by adolescent prisoners together with Tinseltown scribe John Hamburg (*Meet the Parents)* and directed by Adam Davidson (an Academy Award–winner for his short *The Lunch Date*).

The Monster—as in "she got the Monster," the kids' slang for HIV (see sidebar)—tells the story of three tough urban youths, one of whom is HIV positive but would rather let his friends think he's a virgin than 'fess up about his status. Produced by ScenariosUSA, a nonprofit that hooks up young people and adult industry pros to make issue-oriented flicks, The Monster will premiere on the eve of World AIDS Day 2000 in New York City and then be available nationwide (contact info@ scenariosusa.com or 212. 481.6687 for more info).

The film was conceived during screenwriting workshops organized by Scenarios cofounder Kristen Joiner. Determined to hear the voices of at-risk yet hard-to-reach jailed youth, she approached the Island Academy at Rikers, inviting inmate students to flesh out AIDSy screen dreams with the help of celluloid pros Doug Liman (director of *Swingers* and *Go*) and producer Avram Ludwig. The classes produced five rough-draft screenplays, each about the isolation of urban HIVers. A 16-member jury of teens, movie mavens and AIDS pros gave the thumbs up to *The Monster.*

"I like to write a lot," says Randy Walton, 18, one of two Monster-makers old enough to be identified (just another minor publicity hindrance). "Usually I write poetry or songs, so this is very new." And unlike most of his day-to-day prison routines—being shuttled to and from classes at the Academy and back to his cell—he and the other writers are now enjoying some control over their lives, with big-shot movie types taking *their* advice.

"The idea of kids speaking directly to other kids intrigued me," director Davidson says. "It was definitely alive with language. It felt very fresh, real and gripping, but the story was just not there." With a director and producers on board, all that was missing was "a schmuck with an Underwood," as Jack Warner once dubbed film scribes.

Enter Hamburg. Adapting the initial *Monster* concept, he and Davidson created an outline that they pitched to the teens at Rikers, who gave it the green light. The young men were led, in shackles, to the chapel-cum-conference room, and the shooting script underwent fine-tuning. "These guys have no formal training as writers," Hamburg says, "but they came up with incredibly funny, perceptive stuff. They were saying, 'No, I don't like this line or that story beat.' But they were actually coming from a place of 'I've lived that, and I know that wouldn't happen: She wouldn't say that to him.'"

While Walton has shown natural talent for screenwriting, and may even pursue it professionally once released, right now he's all about how the message is the medium. "I feel like I'm helping my peers out," he says. "I know a lot of people who don't use condoms. I'm the oldest of six sisters and two brothers, so I try to set the example. I'm just being a big brother."

In ***The Monster*****,** a quiet 16-year-old (James) and his two friends chase after the same honey (Samantha). James manages to make a date with her, but he bails on her at the last minute. An excerpt from the script, by Brinton Newson, Randy Walton and Jarel Turner, with John Hamburg and Adam Davidson.

INTERIOR HEALTH CLINIC

James exits an examining room, talking to a NURSE.

JAMES: Anything else?

NURSE: You're doing great, James. The levels all look good. We'll see you in another three weeks.

As James heads to the door, he hears…

SAMANTHA: That's what you call welcoming someone new to the neighborhood?

He turns and sees SAMANTHA, right across the room, looking pissed.

JAMES: Samantha, what are you doing here?

SAMANTHA: This is where my sister works. You better have a damn good explanation. Back where I'm from, a man would never treat a lady like that.

JAMES: Look, I'm sorry. (pause) I didn't think you'd really wanna hang with me.

SAMANTHA: And why's that?

JAMES: 'Cause I'm HIV positive.

Beat. This hangs in the air. Then…

SAMANTHA: So? That gives you the right to leave me stranded on a dirty subway platform?

James just looks down.

JAMES: Nah, it ain’t like that. Look, do me a favor and don’t say nothing, right. Even my boys don’t know the truth. They think I’m a virgin.

SAMANTHA: Boy, you’re a trip. You telling me you’d rather have your “friends” thinking you’re a virgin than HIV positive?

JAMES: You don’t know them. They’d never hang with me if they knew I had the Monster.

SAMANTHA: Well that’s their problem. I’m not afraid of you. As long as you tell me the truth, there’s nothing to be afraid of. And anyway,

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