For Ahkeem

Jeremy S. Levine, Landon Van Soest

Producer Iyabo Boyd, Nicholas Weissman, Jeremy S. Levine.
Production companies Iyabo Boyd (New York, USA), Weissman Studio (New York, USA), Transient Pictures (New York, USA).
Directed by Jeremy S. Levine, Landon Van Soest. **Director of photography** Nicholas Weissman. **Editor** Lily Henderson. **Music** Noah Bennett Cunningam. **Sound design** John Moros, Rich Bologna.

Colour. 89 min. English.
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World sales Wide House

Daje is seventeen, and just as unruly and caught up in her own thoughts as others of her age the world over. We only realise her future hangs in the balance when we see her go to juvenile court with her mother: she's been expelled from school for rebelliousness and has just one last chance to get back on track. Yet the true gravity of her situation only gradually becomes clear: such as when we see the many names of her friends written on her notebook followed by R.I.P. and a recent date, or when Daje talks to her boyfriend about whether she – or he – might also die so young.

For Ahkeem explores the cosmos of a young black woman in St. Louis, Missouri, not far from Ferguson, where Michael Brown was shot in August 2014. The film adheres to a strictly personal perspective to recount her upbringing in today's United States and show the predetermined paths open to her – lined as they are with barricaded brick buildings. But it also reveals Daje's talent at avoiding the pitfalls of being either a victim or a model student, while evolving into an impressive film protagonist – of a documentary that depicts her complicated life more in the style of a poignant feature than a social reportage.

Dorothee Wenner

"Racism is just more overt now"

As much as **For Akheem** *centres on a young woman named Daje Shelton, it is also very much a film about a black community in St. Louis, Missouri – in particular, about an alternative school for teenagers from the area. How did you first become aware of the neighbourhood, Daje's home base?*

Landon Van Soest: The film is a coming-of-age story about one teenage girl and the incredible challenges she faces day-to-day as she fights to graduate from an alternative high school. But in many ways the challenges Daje faces are emblematic of the struggles many black teenagers across the United States deal with every day, and how their lives intersect with biased social institutions that have set them up to fail.

Jeremy S. Levine: We wanted to tell a deeply personal story about what it means to live your life when so many systems are set up against you, when school discipline policies are used to suspend and expel black students in huge numbers, when the police and the courts assume you are a criminal because of your race and age. We wanted to root the issues in a personal, cinematic narrative that would resonate with audiences on an emotional level.

Landon Van Soest: We were first introduced to the school through our executive producer, Jeff Truesdell, and immediately inspired by the incredible students we met there. Daje, whom everyone calls 'Boonie', jumped out at us immediately with her curiosity and clear hunger for self-expression. She wasn't necessarily a star athlete or a jaw-dropping performer, but a bold, resilient young woman fighting for her future. She's a special person, but maybe not in the most expected ways.

By the time you started this film, nobody could have foreseen the dramatic, traumatic – but also wonderful – events taking place in the seventeenth year of Daje's life. In retrospect, do you think your presence had any impact on her decisions, on the way she reacted to the many challenges? I know it's a bit of a hypothetical question, but I wonder how you – and she – reacted to the fact that whatever she did, it was somehow documented, observed, filmed – with the intention of being shared, later on, with a wide audience?

Jeremy S. Levine: Certainly our presence impacted Boonie's life; it's impossible not to. We don't see ourselves as 'flies on the wall'. Unless you are using hidden cameras or something like that, you are there in the room with another person. It's a relationship, a partnership. We weren't just looking for a documentary 'subject' – which I think is a terrible word. We were looking for a partner to make a film with. The fact that we're white, that we're men, and we're not from the community, made it vital for us to create this kind of meaningful collaboration.

Landon Van Soest: I can't say for sure what motivated Boonie to start working with us, but I think the intimacy of the film is a testament to the relationship we built over the last three or four years. We became a huge part of each other's lives, and she was a vital partner in the process of making the film. All of the narration is drawn directly from her personal journals, letters, and off-camera conversations, and I think it's really the heart of the film.

As a documentary, **For Akheem** *borrows very obviously from fiction filmmaking; in fact, sometimes the editing makes me feel as though I am watching a feature. You must have had vast amounts of footage to achieve this effect. Please tell me something about your artistic approach.*

Landon Van Soest: It's great to hear that was your experience watching it. We want viewers to get lost in the narrative of the film and swept up in the emotional journey of the characters. I think we impose unnecessary limitations on what documentary storytelling can be. I see no reason why non-fiction films can't have every bit as much dramatic tension and fully developed characters as fiction films, and that's really what we're striving to do. We certainly hope that audiences will be motivated to learn more about the issues in our films and we are working hard to provide all the possible resources to do so, but for the ninety minutes that you're in the theatre, we're focussed on telling an immersive story in the way only cinema can.

Jeremy S. Levine: We used this as our guide in crafting the film, from the way it was shot – using cinema cameras with prime lenses – to the way it's presented without title cards, lower thirds, or facts and figures. We definitely accumulated huge amounts of footage over the course of our three years of production, and spent nearly as long with our editor, crafting the story elements into a well-paced narrative.
Certainly there are still differences when you are making a documentary. You have much less control of the circumstances. Sometimes, we shot in situations with less-than-ideal sound, which is why there are occasional English subtitles. But I think this rawness, this technical limitation, is actually a positive in some cases. You even see fiction films fake these limitations to try to enhance the feelings of immediacy. We embraced the rawness of certain scenes to enhance the 'reality' of the moment.

While you were far into your project's development, in August 2014, the young, unarmed teenager Michael Brown was gunned down in nearby Ferguson. The event and the following eruption of violence made headlines worldwide. How did the event influence your original project's concept? What were the challenges for you as filmmakers who started shooting somewhere on society's fringes, onto which, suddenly, all spotlights were turned?

Landon Van Soest: Well for Boonie, it wasn't surprising at all that a black teenager was shot by the police in her community – her cousin, an unarmed college student, had been shot twenty-five times by the police less than a year earlier. What was surprising to her was the amount of attention the shooting was getting from the news media and activists across the country. After Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Jordan Davis and many others, there was a growing tension that reached a breaking point in Ferguson and gave rise to the movement we're seeing today. It was clear to us pretty early on that we were witnessing history in the making and we couldn't ignore it.

Jeremy S. Levine: Clearly this was a pivotal moment for our country, but it was also a monumental event for Boonie – and the film. We were with Boonie for the first few days of her senior year when the protests broke out just a few miles up the road. For Boonie, who was pregnant at the time, the implications of the situation carried a lot of extra weight. She was forced to contend with the reality of raising a black boy in St. Louis today.

Considering the current political landscape of your country, what are your hopes for the film's release in the US? After all, **For Akheem** *is also a coming-of-age film, so it might be interesting to do outreach programmes, for instance, to younger audiences, who are known not to be the most avid cinemagoers. Do you have any special plans?*

Jeremy S. Levine: During the Obama years, it was possible for some Americans – mostly white Americans – to ignore or deny the persistence of racism. But the election of Trump changed that. There isn't necessarily more racism in the US since the election, it's just more overt now, more out in the open, and coming even from the highest office. We've never fully dealt with the legacy of slavery, we've never made proper amends, and so here we are still, dealing with its ripples. We hope our film addresses this moment. Certainly, there is a huge lack of empathy and understanding in the United States. But most of that discussion in our country has been about the need for liberals to understand the rural, white working class. While that may be useful, it seems to me that it's even more vital that people understand the perspective of a girl like Boonie.

Landon Van Soest: I'm sure everyone will experience the film in a different way. For a lot of people this might be a unique opportunity to spend time with a girl like Boonie, and hopefully forge a connection with someone they'd never get to know otherwise. Others might see a lot of themselves and their own experiences in Boonie, even if they're not used to seeing it on screen. I hope the film has a special resonance for young people and we're looking for partners who can help us bring it directly to schools and juvenile detention centres. But regardless of your background, I think there is a shared human experience that comes from overcoming obstacles and an opportunity for compassion in hearing a specific point-of-view. For me, that experience goes a long way toward opening yourself up and working toward meaningful change.

Interview: Dorothee Wenner, January 2017

Jeremy S. Levine was born in 1984 in Beverly, Massachusetts, USA. He studied at Ithaca College in New York State until 2006. In 2006, he co-founded the Transient Pictures production company in Brooklyn, along with Landon Van Soest. The two founded the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective the following year.

Landon Van Soest was born in 1981 in Denver, Colorado, USA. He studied Film and Photography at Ithaca College in New York State from 2000 until 2004. In 2006, he co-founded the Transient Pictures production company in Brooklyn, along with Jeremy S. Levine. The two founded the Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective the following year.

Films

Jeremy S. Levine: 2014: *Am I Next* (5 min., co-directed by Nicholas Weissman). 2017: ***For Ahkeem***.

Landon Van Soest: 2010: *Good Fortune*. 2017: ***For Ahkeem***.