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Q&A with Bay Area filmmakers Temi Ojo & Vanessa Mariveles



BY CHARLOTTE CUSACK
STAFF WRITER

I had the good fortune of meeting award-winning filmmakers Temi Ojo, director, and Vanessa Mariveles, producer, on a recent afternoon — in front of Livermore Cinemas, naturally.

The young, Pleasanton-based partners (in both business and life) have created four short films thus far: “A Bad Bad Thing,” “The Will of the Father,” “Habitual Aggression,” which was nominated for Best Diaspora Short Film by the Africa Movie Academy Award, and “Renouncing Angelica,” which won numerous awards, including Best Short Film at ION International Film Festival, Special Artistic Achievement Prize at Silicon Valley Film Festival and was recognized on Black Entertainment Television’s (BET) *Lens on Talent*. They are currently working on their first full-length feature film, “Seedless.”

I chatted with Temi and

Vanessa about what inspired them to pursue film, what they’re striving to say in each movie they produce, and what the future holds for the ambitious pair.

DL: When and where did your partnership begin?

Vanessa: Temi and I met in 2005, at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, where we were attending the Academy’s film school. We collaborated and starred in our first black and white film together in 2006. From there, we shot subsequent films and commercials together.

DL: What themes do your films explore?

Vanessa: We’re always trying to present social issues. For instance, in “Renouncing Angelica,” we focused on bone marrow donation. The latest short film, “Habitual Aggression,” touched upon child abuse and domestic violence. “Seedless,” our current feature film, aims to bring awareness to sex trafficking and slavery.

DL: These are weighty issues. Are you trying to bring awareness and thus create subsequent change?

Temi: Yes, we definitely want to create change. Awareness is not enough. People have to be motivated to take action. A lot of times, people don’t take action because certain issues aren’t true to their reality. So, we find ways in which we can bring their reality closer to these other big issues, such as including themes of love in the narrative. For example,

the main character in “Seedless” is a journalist investigating a sex slavery operation while also dealing with her fiancé’s infidelity.

We use film as a medium for expression from our respective points of view. I have come to realize that this is such a privilege because we have the ability to say something that could enrich lives or improve the community. Throughout film school, I did my annual pilgrimage to the Sundance Film Festival. I would stand in line in the cold, sometimes for hours, and I realized that film was way more powerful than I imagined it to be.

DL: How does it feel to be young filmmakers breaking into the industry?

Temi: I feel like with anything else in life that’s worth doing and worth committing to, it’s going to be tough. I don’t think the journey of life is meant to be easy, but I have this confidence that I can do this. My life journey has been one where I’ve faced tougher challenges. I was born in Nigeria. Then, I was given the opportunity to come to the United States when I was 15 years old to study electrical engineering. I worked in Silicon Valley as a semiconductor product engineer for over seven years. Now that I’ve acquired a talent and have found my voice as a filmmaker, I know it’s tough, but I feel comfortable now that I’ll make it.

DL: Where are you in getting “Seedless” off the ground?

Vanessa: Right now we’re

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TOP

Pleasanton-based filmmakers, Temi Ojo and Vanessa Mariveles, sit down with *Discover Livermore* at the Nestle Toll House Cafe in downtown Livermore.

PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE CUSACK

LEFT

Temi Ojo and his crew speaking with an actor (out of frame) on the set of Ojo’s film “Habitual Aggression.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF TEMI OJO & CO.

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Filmmakers

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in the development stage — we're working towards raising funds and finding donors and investors.

Temí: This is a film that's a low budget film by Hollywood standards, but it's still expensive. Our ambition with this film is to have a worldwide theatrical release. So, one of the milestones is financial. Another is bringing in a certain caliber of talent into the film. We hope to secure some well-known actors for the film. We'll also be gathering local actors and reaching out to actors in Los Angeles and other parts of the world who are fairly well recognized. Even though they're expensive, we want them on board because we want people to see this film.

We already have a completed script, and we hope to begin principal photography early next year. We will be shooting this locally — possibly here in Livermore and definitely throughout the Bay Area. Hopefully, in late 2012 or early 2013, it will be slated for

international release.

DL: Given the subject matter, why shoot "Seedless" as a full length film as opposed to a documentary?

Temí: Vanessa and I have a bias toward feature films. When you sit down to watch a documentary, you're aware that you're going to be taught something. It's like sitting in on a lecture. I think some of the most influential things in our lives are the things we stumble on by accident. So, with 'Seedless,' you're watching a film about something interesting and then discover something about sex slavery, too. I think narrative film makes it more comfortable to learn something that's far away from me if I'm also being entertained in the process.

DL: You've been well recognized by numerous Black film festivals. Do you want to continue to be a voice for the Black community or do you plan to step outside that market?

Temí: One of the things I've learned about growing up somewhere and then living life elsewhere is that I look forward to seeing what we all have in common. I certainly want to serve those communities because there's so much that could be said, and there's a lot of misrepresentation; I wish I could share the perspective I have because I feel it's been a great privilege to be African, then African-American, then a member of the innovators in Silicon Valley, and now to be an artist. I've lived many lives, and I want to make films that share what we all have in common — our common joys and common problems. But, I would prefer not to be seen as just a Black or African filmmaker, even though its part of who I am. I want my career to represent much more.

For more information about Temí Ojo & Co., visit www.temiojo.com. To learn more about "Seedless" or to make a tax-deductible donation, visit www.seedlessmovie.com.

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