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MAYA BANKOVIC csc
AKILLA'S ESCAPE

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AKILLA'S ESCAPE

By Fanon Chiahomen

Writer-director Charles Officer's latest feature *Akilla's Escape* charts the journey of a 40-year-old drug trader named Akilla Brown (Saul Williams) seeking to turn his life around after a routine deal turns bad. Finding himself caught in the middle of a violent robbery, Brown escapes with one of the thieves, a teenaged Jamaican boy named Sheppard (Thamela Mpumlwana), and the unexpected turn of events forces the older man to confront his own traumatic past as he attempts to save the boy from a similar fate. Set in parallel timelines in contemporary Toronto and 1990s Brooklyn, with much of the action unfolding in a single night, *Akilla's Escape*, which premiered at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, also stars Colm Feore, Vic Mensa and Ronnie Rowe Jr.

“I'M A FAN OF GENRE AND I'M A FAN OF NOIR FILMS, BUT IT WAS ABOUT INFUSING THE GENRE WITH SOME SOUL AND SOMETHING THAT IS CULTURALLY ROOTED AND TRYING TO FIND EVEN THE POETRY IN A CRIME STORY.”

CHARLES OFFICER

Saul Williams as Akilla in the opening credits (black and white photos) of *Akilla's Escape*. Thamela Mpumlwana on set.

Charles Williams: Justin Cummings / Filmworks Inc. On set photos: Anusha Mishra / Copyright Clearance Center

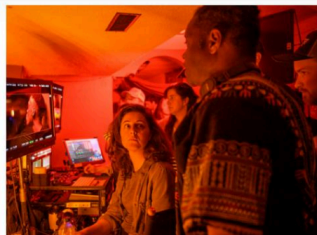
“AKILLA IS A VERY SENSITIVE AND POETIC PERSON SO IT WAS IMPORTANT THAT HIS OWN PRIVATE SPACE HAD THAT SOFTER ALMOST FEMININE TOUCH TO IT. I LOVED THAT THIS WAS NOT WHAT YOU WOULD EXPECT FROM SOMEONE WHO’S LIVED A LIFETIME OF CRIME.”

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Officer says he conceptualized the film with a visual language that would transcend the usual sensationalism of crime dramas. “I’m a fan of genre and I’m a fan of noir films, but it was about infusing the genre with some soul and something that is culturally rooted and trying to find even the poetry in a crime story,” the director says. “And I’m dealing with youth and violence, which is something that I’m anti, so I’m not going to approach it like a Hollywood blockbuster.”

With this in mind, Officer believed Maya Bankovic csc was a natural choice to shoot the film. “Maya’s an artist and I’ve admired her work,” he says. “I wanted a female eye on this, and I feel like because of Maya’s sensitivity and her artistry she’s not going to get caught up in, ‘Let’s do this and smash this and that just to make it look cool.’ And I’m not taking that away from men that they’re not sensitive, but I think the majority when it comes to the cinematic world, we want to see the blood and the guts instead of being like, ‘Okay, what is the essence of this and whose point of view is it from and how does that feel?’”

Much of the shoot took place around Toronto’s Scarborough neighbourhood. “There was an element of embracing the more eerie and barren outskirts feel to that area of the east end,” Bankovic says, but shooting night scenes in June was not easy.

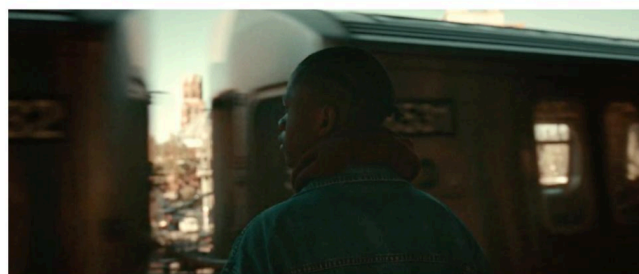


(L-R) Maya Bankovic csc with director Charles Officer. BELOW: Actor, Thamele Mpumlwana

“We were fast approaching the shortest night of the year while we were shooting a film that takes place almost entirely in one night. It was really challenging, and often times the sun comes up and there are some happy accidents that came out of that, like the final shootout scene ended up moving into sunrise, which I think actually works really beautifully, with the interesting flares we got to show that a similar transition has happened narratively.”

The two eras had to be differentiated visually.

“That was one of the really cool things that I loved about Charles’ initial treatment,” Bankovic reveals. “He’d had the film in the works for 10 years so he had a lot of visual ideas going in, and one of them was that he wanted the storyline taking place in 2020 to have a wider visual scope to it to represent the knowledge and scope of understanding Akilla has gained since childhood. He just sees more context, he understands the macro inner workings of things and how everything is interconnected, so in general we knew the present-day stuff was going to look wider. Initially, we considered using very wide spherical primes on these scenes. I had been using anamorphics for commercial work mostly and I hadn’t done anything long format with them yet, but I thought this could be a really cool opportunity to use them on the present-day stuff so that the visual difference



TOP: (L-R) Olunike Adeliyi and Thamele Mpumlwana in a 1995 flashback of *Akilla's Escape*. MIDDLE: Thamele Mpumlwana in a 1995 flashback of *Akilla's Escape*. BOTTOM: Saul Williams in the 2020 timeline of the film, *Akilla's Escape*.



(L-R) Ronnie Row Jr., Shomari Downer with Thameia Mpumiwana in a 1995 flashback.



(L-R) Pedro Miguel Arce and Victor Gomez with Thameia Mpumiwana in the 1995 flashback.



(L-R) Thameia Mpumiwana with Saul Williams and Vic Mensa.



(L-R) Saul Williams and Colm Feore.

was present but it would be a little bit more subtle. So a 50 mm would still be a 50, but there would be more visual information and more context around that character while still maintaining the integrity, the shallow depth of field and the visual quality of a classic closeup. Then the '90s was shot on spherical lenses, mostly longer lenses because it was meant to really situate you into a memory with a more narrow field of view, so things are much tighter, they're more textural, more focused on a detail or a face, less sort of wide coverage and more just meant to feel like an impression or a feeling of a moment. I think the best example of that is the moment where Shadow is smoking weed in the car one afternoon under an overpass and he's explaining the different tiers of the gang system within the Garrison Army. The shot in the car is very tight, the smoke of the joint is very visceral and very all consuming in the frame. And it's pretty subtle, but we definitely wanted it to feel like a memory and less of a jarring visual shift, which would otherwise only serve to alert the viewer that it's a flashback."

Colour timing was also employed to differentiate the two time periods. "On the 1990s stuff, Walt Biljan at REDLAB was the final colourist and he put a 16 mm 500T grain on it, which is a larger grain than what we used as an overlay on the 2020 stuff, which was a tighter grain structure, a 35 mm grain," Bankovic says, adding that both of the lens sets she

used were Cooke. "So 2020 in general has a sleeker more slick aesthetic, it's typically on a dolly or a Steadicam, it's anamorphic, it's got the 35 mm grain structure. And then the '90s has a bit more grit to it, it's handheld, longer lenses, and a lot of these things are written right into the script too, a visual transition would happen when a memory was triggered, so we could plan ways of designing shots, with a bit of movement for example, to help ease that transition." Officer was intentional about infusing Akilla's

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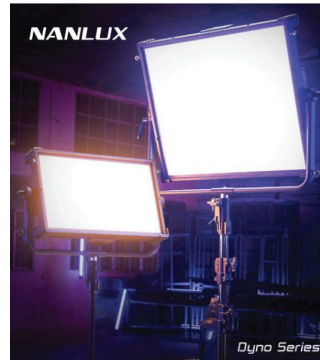
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apartment with a rose-coloured light. "I love colours and I think colours actually have psychological effects on people," the director explains, saying the pink hue highlights the departure from the "brooding dark vibe" typically applied to crime films.

"He really wanted that to signify Akilla's softer more sensitive side," Bankovic offers. "Akilla is a very sensitive and poetic person so it was important that his own private space had that softer almost feminine touch to it. So I loved that this was not what you would expect from someone who's lived a lifetime of crime."

To create the pink ambience, production designer Diana Abbatangelo sourced a true neon light close to the pink that Officer had in mind. "And we were able with our on-set DIT Catherine Pantazopoulos to spin it to the perfect pink that he wanted, and then other times we'd supplement that with a CELEB or a SkyPanel, and we were able to dial in the exact pink we wanted to supplement the practical fixture for faces, for closeups and things like that."

The neo noir aesthetic guided most of Bankovic's lighting choices. "I kept having to remind myself that it was a neo noir," she says. "Those words really helped sort of ground the strategy just in case we were in a situation where we could easily default to something a lot more straightforward. My gaffer Blayne Badge and Charles and I, we would think of ways to up the contrast in a motivated way or send a harder light through a window, just for a splash of something to evoke that film noir quality so that it wouldn't deviate too far from that genre feel. An example of that is in Faye's kitchen where we decided to play up the blinds and just go for the almost Humphrey Bogart-era hard light but then introducing our green neon spin of the exterior lighting colour palette that we decided on for the present day. "We used tungsten light as much as possible, which was awesome because it's rare that there's time these days to bounce tungsten Fresnels," the DP says. "Catherine has great advice on that; she mentioned for skin tone it often looks much better to cool down tungsten on her system than to gel or



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“I’VE ALWAYS BEEN A BIG FAN OF NOT ONLY CHARLES’ FILMS BUT THE ETHOS BEHIND HIS FILMS AND HOW DEDICATED HE IS TO MAKING VERY PERSONAL STORIES ABOUT SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES WITHIN TORONTO AND GOING VERY DEEP WITH CHARACTER-DRIVEN STORIES ABOUT TORONTO. HE’S SOMEONE WITH A VERY CLEAR AND UNAPOLOGETIC POINT OF VIEW AND HE USES HIS WORK TO MAKE THAT POINT OF VIEW KNOWN.”

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Saul Williams as Akilla.

go with too many LEDs, and especially with darker skin tones I found that method to be very flattering. We had HMIs, as well. We would use 4K HMIs often on exteriors during the day or on night-for-day scenes. And our largest light was an 18K that we only used a couple of times on some of the 1990s flashback sequences.”

Other than the 16 mm intro sequence shot on a spring-wound Bolex, footage was captured on the ALEXA Mini, “and then the 1990s stuff on spherical lenses was just matted to match the aspect ratio, again, just to ease with those transitions a bit,” Bankovic says. “Craig Milne at Sim was great in helping me choose which anamorphics to use. He was so generous. He’s actually become such a

true collaborator for me over the years, like really helping source and figure out what the best lens solution is for the application.”

Final colour grading was spread out over several weeks. “We started with Walt, we did a day with him and then we sort of let all those decisions percolate, and then we revisited it a couple weeks later, did a few more days, and Charles would think on things for a while and then want to try a few different looks out,” Bankovic says. “And they were waiting on this amazing score that Saul Williams had collaborated on with Massive Attack’s Robert Del Naja. I had heard stems from their tracks early on in preproduction and I knew the film was going to have a lot of hefty, juicy stuff to it, so the colour had to match the gravitas of the score because I knew the score was going to be so rich and great we had to give people something to look at as well as listen to; the whole thing had to feel like a vibe.”

Being chosen to shoot *Akilla’s Escape* for Officer was an honour, Bankovic says. “I’ve always been a big fan of not only Charles’ films but the ethos behind his films and how dedicated he is to making very personal stories about specific experiences within Toronto and going very deep with character-driven stories about Toronto,” she maintains. “He’s someone with a very clear and unapologetic point of view and he uses his work to make that point of view known.”

Although Officer says he began writing *Akilla’s Escape* in 2010, its premiere this year comes at a time of global reckoning on race and violence in society.

“The social acceptance of violence has allowed a lot of societies here to see images over and over again until this crazy one hit,” Officer says, referring to the viral video of the police killing of Minneapolis man George Floyd that sparked a global uprising against police brutality and systemic racism. While Officer could not have anticipated this moment, the director appreciates that *Akilla’s Escape* can contribute to the ongoing dialogue by exploring how forces like “colonialism and politics can be the undercurrent that creates the atmosphere for all this violence,” he says. “This is a broad, big situation, and I feel that this film for me is about our youth and all the nonsense that goes around deterring and derailing our youth from being excellent.”



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