

ARTS

Arts editor: Cari Mason • Arts assistant: Emanuel Blum • arts@imprint.uwaterloo.ca



UW Drama
Check out the
MacIvor² Review
 —page 26

I c e d i n B l a c k

Melissa Dunne
 SPECIAL TO IMPRINT

“Where are you from?” If you are white, chances are you have rarely or never been asked this question. If you happen to be African-Canadian, you have probably been asked this question so many times you lost count a long, long time ago. The perspective of African-Canadians is grossly under-represented in Canadian media. The film festival *Iced in Black* is an opportunity to see an honest portrayal of the often misrepresented African-Canadian culture.

The third annual film festival *Iced in Black: Canadian Black Experiences on Film* was held at UW this past weekend from February 6 to 9.

The film festival has its roots at UW. The founder, national director, and program coordinator Nadia L. Hohn was a UW student at Conrad Grebel from 1998 to 2002. Hohn earned her honours arts degree from UW while also developing a national film festival that brings the African-

Canadian experience to the big screen — feel like an underachiever yet? I Hohn organized her first film festival at Conrad Grebel College in 1999. Through collaboration with WPIRG, UW students and volunteers she founded *Iced in Black*. The festival now features over 21 films and is being held in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Halifax and Waterloo over the month of February, which is Black History Month.

I had the opportunity to attend the Saturday night screenings of the festival which included *Short Shorts*, nine short films shown back to back, and the feature-length documentary *Divas: Love Me Forever*. The theme for this year’s *Iced in Black* film festival was “soul on ice: a celebration of the arts.”

The short films ranged from a documentary about modernist painter Roland Jean to a spoken word piece about the “style” of a poet’s soul. *Blind Date*, clocking in at just under seven minutes, stood out as one of the more heart-wrenching pieces. The short film has a melancholic atmosphere. The

blind date, the person that the girl in the film has been waiting for her whole life, ends up being her father — a man who barely recognizes the woman she has become.

Destiny is a black and white film about a teenage girl with big dreams of becoming an actress. It seamlessly mixes humour with a grounding sense of reality. Destiny lives with her strict grandma, Miss May, who has a strong island accent and very narrow ideas about the type of women who become actresses. In a hilarious dream scene, Miss May reminds Destiny, “Don’t talk to riff-raff boys, not even to give them directions. Make sure your dresses are hemmed to keep you from becoming the slut you are so bent on becoming, and don’t eat fruit on the street because flies will follow you.” Though *Destiny* is only 20 minutes long, in that short time the young woman resonates with the self-doubt that we all feel at times, yet she manages to retain a sense of dignity and hope.

As a visible minority, African-Canadians can’t erase their ties with other

cultures. Hohn pointed out that “people will always look at me and ask me where I’m from. It continually comes up, there is a constant duality, reference to previous cultures.”

The feature documentary *Divas: Love Me Forever* was shown after the *Short Shorts*. It is an intriguing, humorous and a sometimes sad look at a group of black drag queens living and working in Toronto. The documentary follows six drag queens — Michelle Ross, Chris Edwards, Jackae Baker, Stephanie Stevens, Matti Dinah and Duchess (deceased). When asked what a true diva is, Baker responded “a diva is someone that always gets their way. She is the best of the best and has a sex appeal that will make you cream in your pants.” All of the people in this documentary are strong: not only are they African-Canadians living in a society that likes to pretend it is colour-blind, they are gay and they dress up as women for a living. There are many moments of humour and perseverance interspersed with the harsh reality of the gay experience.

Divas: Love Me Forever succeeds in giving a rare glimpse into the sadness, loneliness and self-doubt that lurks beneath all of us, no matter how resilient we may seem. Baker explained with stunning clarity why it is not a conscious choice to be gay: “You might be bashed and killed, you will never have kids, you could die of AIDS, it can be a lonely life. Who wants to go through that?” *Divas: Love Me Forever* and the discussion afterwards revealed the unique perspective of the African-Canadian homosexual. The Caribbean, where most of the drag queens featured in the documentary immigrated from, is predominantly Christian and notorious for being unaccepting of the gay community. The panel discussion also referred to the many instances of homophobic lyrics in reggae and rap music. Hohn pointed out the prevalence of machoism within the African-Canadian community.

Iced in Black: Canadian Black Experiences on Film was a rare opportunity to get a glimpse into an under-represented group in Canadian media.