

# Emerging Lens Festival celebrates culturally diverse storytelling

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1 / 4 Nathan Simmons, left, and Taylor Olson star in Hustle & Heart, the award-winning short film directed by Koumbie and playing at the 7th annual Emerging Lens Festival on Wednesday.

Hustle & Heart is the little film that could.

Made for \$400, it's the first film directed by Halifax actor Koumbie, a regular on Mr. D, and it's part of the opening night program Wednesday at Pier 21 for the 7<sup>th</sup> annual Emerging Lens Film Festival of culturally diverse Canadian and local film.

"It's kind of perfect," says Koumbie, who made Hustle & Heart with her partner, writer-producer Taylor Olson, through Afro-Viking Pictures.

"I'm Afro. He's the Viking," she adds.

Last year she and Olson checked out the Emerging Lens Festival while they were in pre-production for Hustle & Heart. "We went to see the films and we met diverse filmmakers. I didn't know they existed in Halifax!" says Koumbie, who has trouble finding professional black actors when casting her films.

"I was hoping that it would play there."

This year Emerging Lens features four days of free screenings, each opened by local musical acts, with a collaboration with Reel Canada Wednesday to present films from across Canada in celebration of National Film Day,

Halifax documentary filmmaker Fateh Ahmed is screening his third documentary, With No Consultation, about the collapse of the Nova Scotia film industry, at the festival Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at Halifax Central Library.

"This is an opportunity to screen political films, social films, cultural films and it is one of the most important festivals in Canada," says Ahmed, of Core Film Productions. "It provides a very good opportunity for filmmakers of various backgrounds to be able to tell their stories."

his story is about the effect of the Liberal government's 2015 drastic cuts to the film tax credit on the province's filmmakers and film industry,

with a lot of passion and zero funding, Ahmed spent two and a half years interviewing filmmakers, businessmen, entrepreneurs and politicians but no Liberals because they refused to be interviewed.

That was very disappointing."



*Halifax documentary filmmaker Fateh Ahmed, right, with co-producer John Saunders, present *Without a Word: No Consultation*, looking at how cuts to Nova Scotia's film tax credit devastated filmmakers*

and the film industry, at the Emerging Lens Festival Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at Halifax Central Library.

The filmmaker was inspired by seeing a photograph "that moved me" of a young man and his wife carrying their three-month-old at a protest outside the legislature. "They were basically begging the government to back off from their decision.

He was determined to do a film that would speak for the 3,200 people employed in the film industry who have lost their jobs."

For the government's \$26.8 million investment in the 2014 film tax credit, "the film industry brought in \$80 million. . . so why dismantle the industry?" says Ahmed. "And we still don't know the answers."

He was surprised that some filmmakers and organizations were too fearful to be identified so he gave them nicknames.

is very interesting — and terrifying in a way — to see how a political decision made quickly and abruptly can impact an industry in a short period of time.”

Ahmed, who will be putting the expanded feature online for free at [coremediapro.com](http://coremediapro.com), wants “as many people as possible” to see *With No Consultation*. It's not just for Nova Scotians.

There are always lessons to learn from history. We learn not to repeat our mistakes, how to adapt to challenges whether it's from the political or the personal end and to be able to truly adjust to change, which may take effect in four to five weeks.”

Ahmed is the film's director, writer and producer with co-producers John Saunders, Colin Hampsey and Justin Swinamer and he worked with camera operator- mixing engineer Alejandro Quintanilla and animators Jay Malone and Ian Kehayes.

As the government makes some moves towards increasing film funding, filmmakers have become politicized, joining political parties and even running for office. “Filmmakers are survivors,” says Ahmed, now working on *Winds From the East*, a documentary about Sayed Alia, a man who came to Nova Scotia from India seeking medical help and ended up creating the Motor Vehicles Act.

*Struggle & Heart*, winner of best short at the Atlantic Film Festival, is the story of a white high school backup quarterback (Olson) falling for the team's black star (Nathan Simmons), who is not gay. The two sort out their differences and remain friends.

Thematically, it fits in with Afro-Viking's mandate to foster “a Canadian culture of kindness, courage and inclusion,” says Koumbie.

In his films, Afro-Viking has dealt with mental health, race, gender fluidity and “really just acceptance of people being different and that being OK.”

Koumbie, who's appeared as high school student Sheila in six seasons of *Mr. D* and played a recurring role in *Sex & Violence*, grew up in Halifax and is committed to staying here to make films.



*Halifax actor and filmmaker Koumbie is part of Afro-Viking Pictures with Halifax writer-director-actor Taylor Olson.*

"I was four years old when I told my mum I wanted to act and she got me an agent," she says.

As a child, she intensely pursued dance until encountering theatre in middle school. "As soon as I was able to talk on stage, that was exciting."

Koumbie studied theatre at Concordia University in Montreal then moved to Toronto. "I was waiting for my agent to call and there were a lot of people starting to make their own work. I got involved with YEAA Shorts."

She made two short films through YEAA Shorts, ACTRA Toronto's program for emerging artists.

When she was producing one of them "I was talking to the director about what I was looking for and she said, 'I think you need to

direct it.'

My parents were, 'Of course you're a director, you're so bossy.' "

For her first film, which she shot in her apartment and which premiered at Reelworld, she was the director, producer and the actor. "I remember the climax of the film was me crying in the shower. At the time all I could think of was when I had to put the chili on for lunch," she says. "It was my producer brain." (Union rules dictate strict lunch breaks)

"I will never produce myself if I'm also directing and acting, which is why Hustle & Heart is such a different thing because we brought in Jake Ivany as producer and he's a life-saver."

Hustle & Heart, which Afro-Viking is expanding into a feature film, has gone to the Montreal International Black Film Festival, the Toronto International Black Film Festival and Reelworld. Heading to Ottawa's National Arts Centre in Ottawa, it is part of the Halifax Mayworks Festival's short film program May 8 at 7 p.m. at Halifax Central Library.

Koumbie, who acted in Studio Black!'s first season and directed one episode for its second, had a "ridiculous year" in 2016 working through Afro-Viking.

She has also directed Hustle & Heart, Ariyah & Tristan's Inevitable Break-up, written and produced by Afro-Viking Pictures as a 1K WAVE Atlantic feature for female filmmakers, and Perfectly Sane, written by Taylor Olson

and co-produced by Loud Baby Productions and Afro-Viking Pictures.

So far this year, she has directed Afro-Viking's first music video and Horizontal Concavity, which she wrote and which was produced by Kevin Hartford. It's loosely based on Koumbie's experience in Toronto.

"I got pretty depressed when I moved there. It's about a young man struggling with anxiety and depression and it's manifested through him seeing himself as an alien."

As an actor in 2016, she was Sheila in Mr. D season 6, Aria in Sex & Violence season 3, Ariyah in Ariyah & Arian's Inevitable Break-up, in Black Cop and in a number of local short films and film projects.

She is passionate about directing. "I am surrounded with people who are better and smarter than me and they take my idea and they make it better."

She is also passionate about women working in film. "The thing with filmmaking is behind the camera for women, for people of colour, it's kind of shocking. There are a number of female producers. As for a lot of female writers and directors the numbers are low."

The full program for the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Emerging Lens Film Festival, produced by the Charles Taylor Theatre and Media Arts Association, is online [here](#).

Thursday's guest filmmaker is Ontario storyteller Thyron Tommy. Friday is Youth Night at the North Branch Library. Saturday includes the 10:30 a.m. Your Perfect Pitch workshop, and the 7 p.m., closing night films at the Black Cultural Centre, with guest Cazhmere Downey, whose documentary is about the African Nova Scotian 400-year-long presence in Canada and yet she is still asked where she is from.

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