

Halifax-shot feature tackles modern love on a low budget

May 23, 2016 9:53 AM by: Stephen Cooke

1 / 4 Actor-director Koumbie and co-writer-actor Taylor Olson (seated) are seen May 18 during a rehearsal for Ariyah and Tristan's Inevitable BreakUp being shot in the basement of a south-end Halifax home. (TIM KROCHAK / Local Xpress)

Having visited several film sets over the years, you get used to the sight of high-powered lights, expensive cameras, unusual props and a busy crew attending to all of the above.

You aren't usually greeted by the director in their pyjamas.

For triple threat actor-writer-director Koumbie, it's a fetching black and white paisley flannel pair of PJs that she sports when she emerges from the basement of a house on the edge of Point Pleasant Park.

The home of the family of a longtime friend, it's also the site of all the action in her feature debut Ariyah and Tristan's Inevitable BreakUp, one of five feature films in Women in Film and Television-Atlantic's 1kWave Atlantic program, in which five female filmmakers have the opportunity — and the challenge — to make a movie for \$1,000.

One of the ways you can make a feature for the cost of a really nice bicycle is to confine the story to a single room. In this case, it's in a house, set-dressed as a bachelor apartment, where Koumbie has also been staying during the shoot.

"I highly recommend making a film where everything takes place in a bedroom. It's super-great," grins the filmmaker, known to many as smart student Sheila on CBC-TV's Mr. D. "I think I've worn my slippers for 80 per cent of the shoot."

Another way to keep costs low is to work with friends. In this case, it's Taylor Olson, who co-wrote the script and co-stars with Koumbie as the Tristan to her Ariyah in the film's titular relationship, which the film follows from first date to life-changing crossroads.

When the 1kWave Atlantic program was announced, the pair spent a weekend coming up with an outline

the movie they would like to make together, trying to carve out a budget for a \$1,000 feature.

“I guessed we wouldn’t spend money on ... anything?” recalls Koumbie, who at the time had recently participated in the Written and Directed by Women workshop run by WIFT-AT and the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-Op.

At the time, I was thinking, ‘I want to make a feature film before I’m 25!’ And then I did that workshop and I thought, ‘OK, before I’m 30.’

I realized how much would go into that, and how insane it would be, and decided to readjust my expectations. But WIFT has been really good to me. I pitched a short film at their Women Making Waves conference, which was accepted, and then they announced this feature program, and I think I was just riding the wave of all of these things happening and just went, ‘Yeah, that’s great. What a great thing to do.’

A former performer since age four, Koumbie now considers that her lucky number since she and Olson wrote the script for Ariyah and Tristan’s Inevitable BreakUp in four days, memorized it over four days of rehearsal and is directing and performing in it on a tight four-day schedule that relies on a great deal of on-set ingenuity on behalf of the 20-person crew.

Besides sticking to the basement apartment set, the stage is set by a clever lighting rig that can change from day to night at the flick of a switch, while scenes are captured by a computer-controlled camera on a sophisticated mount that resembles a body brace, equipped with multiple gimbals to keep it steady as it moves.

In the first scene after a lunch break, Koumbie has switched from PJs into clubbing clothes, as Ariyah and Tristan burst through the door at the end of a date, kissing and doffing clothes before falling onto the bed. The lights dim, and the cast and crew immediately prepare for a scene taking place in bed the next morning.

“That’s the best way to shoot this in four days, from start to finish,” Koumbie says between takes, about combining the moving camera of film with the lighting shifts of a stage play for convenient, in-camera editing. “Whether the transition happens on set or we do a quick wardrobe change and just go right into the next scene.”

Back on the set, the first assistant director tells the lighting tech to “cue the moon” as a warm glow shines through the window, and the camera zooms in on Ariyah and Tristan under the covers.

Ariyah moves in for a snuggle while she looks vaguely uncomfortable with the idea, which sums up the uneasy

ture of the relationship the film portrays, as the two young professionals — she's an animator, he's a photographer — try to figure out how love fits into the equation of their lives.

"We're calling it a 'rom-drom,' short for romantic drama, where it goes from fun, fun, fun to maybe not so fun," laughs Koumbie, who recently watched the period love story *Brooklyn* and thought about how much things have changed in over half a century.

The New York City-set film's sweet portrayal of young love between an Irish immigrant and an Italian apprentice plumber led her to wonder, "What happened? Where did things go wrong? Why are things that happen now so ridiculous?"

By contrast, Koumbie thought about how potential and actual romantic partners now interact through social media, and the weird paradox of the high value placed on sexual experience which, at the same time, seems to have been increasingly devalued in its social currency.

"I don't understand modern romance," she sighs. "Especially at that point where you're young, but not super-young, and you're just on the verge of starting your adult life, like I am. You decide to be with a person, but, like, why? There's so much changing at once, and then you get that feeling that it seems inevitable things won't work out in a lot of ways, but you decide to go ahead with it anyway.

"Weirdly, I feel like I predicted my own future by writing this film, but don't worry, things are fine."

At the moment, Koumbie is heavily invested in her relationship with the art of the moving image. Before starting Ariyah and Tristan's *Inevitable BreakUp*, she had just wrapped filming on *Hustle & Heart*, her first short film as a writer-director only, and is preparing to shoot another short later this summer.

"I just saw the second rough cut (of *Hustle & Heart*), and I have to say I don't hate it," she says. "Everything I've done, in terms of me being behind the scenes, I've thought, 'OK, maybe next time'"

In fact, after being on both sides of the camera for the short film *King's Cup*, she swore she wouldn't direct herself as an actor again, but it only made sense for this new feature film, where everybody involved is wearing multiple hats.

"It turns out when you're acting and writing at the same time, it can be fun, and we've been changing lines on the set when we realize things aren't working," she says. "There's definitely more of a fluidity there, although it gets a bit strange when you're having a three-way conversation with yourself, 'Am I OK with that? Is the director OK with that? Is the actor OK with that? We're good.'"



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