

# VISIONTV

## SHOOTS FOR DIVERSITY

**EXTERIOR.** Rose Avenue Community Centre in downtown Toronto. A man stabs a victim on Wellesley Street and dashes into a canyon of highrise, low-income apartment buildings in the city's most dangerous 'hood. Five armed police officers give chase. The suspect slips and falls. As a police cruiser comes screaming up, cops pile atop the assailant on the ground.

"Cut!" barks director Romeo Candido to halt filming a scene about police violence. However, Candido is filming *inside* the community centre while the actual cops are *outside* cuffing their suspect. For a confusing moment, crew members aren't sure which scene is real and which is staged. "The line between reality and fiction is very blurred," deadpans Candido. Candido and his crew are filming *St. Jamestown*, shot on location for VisionTV's inaugural Cultural Diversity Drama Competition. The initiative, a first for the network, awarded \$100,000 each to three one-hour dramas reflecting Canada's diversity of culture. Candido's *St. Jamestown* and Tonya Lee Williams's *Kink in My Hair*, also shot in Toronto, were broadcast on Vision in the fall of 2004, and Charles Officer's *Hotel Babylon*, which was shot in Winnipeg in November, and will be aired in early 2005.

Of the three, *St. Jamestown* most freely crosses reality with fiction. "I always wanted to run a program to teach youth to use media, called the Digital Heritage program," says Candido, "but it never happened. I got too busy. Then, Caroline [his wife], who had been teaching media-literacy courses, had an idea for a show to take place in a community centre. It was obviously *St. Jamestown*." Obvious because his Filipino-Canadian family grew up in the area, a rundown, rent-subsidized enclave comprised of dreary highrises located at the eastern edge of downtown Toronto, which is an intense microcosm of the city's multiracial mix.

The show highlights the real *St. Jamestown*, starting with police brutality and race relations. This is a tough neighbourhood and some local residents are wary about a film crew invading their turf. "It's no joke shooting in *St. Jamestown*," says Candido. "Everyday we had a run-in with a different character. So, we said we were shooting a student film. Even though we involved a lot of the local people, especially young people, some people wanted this area to be locked off from all types of filmmaking." However, this didn't deter Candido and his crew who were working at cut rates on a tight schedule

(filming 11 pages in a single day) while shooting on the acclaimed Panasonic DVX-100A mini-DV camera.

Meanwhile, across town, Tonya Lee Williams was working to complete *Kink in My Hair*, an adaptation of Trey Anthony's hit play, *'da Kink in My Hair*. *Kink* revolves around Novelette's, a hair salon in Toronto's Caribbean neighbourhood of Eglinton Street West, and centres on its enigmatic owner, Novelette (Sheryl Lee Ralph), her Canadian-bred teenage daughter, her flighty sister Joy (Trey Anthony) and their regular patrons, including a Jewish lawyer with "kinky" hair, played by veteran Mimi Kuzyk.

Tonya Lee Williams, an actress from the long-running soap *The Young and the Restless*, has worked on both sides of the border and as a black woman sees things differently. "Canadians haven't yet found their voice in ethnic diversity," says the first-time director who also founded The Reel World Film Festival. "[In Canada] we're just at the opening of that gate, whereas in the United States, some ethnicities, especially Latinos and African-Americans, have really found their voice. A powerful voice."

Many agree that Canadian film and television has lagged behind the true ethnic diversity of Canada. In Toronto, where two of the three VisionTV projects were filmed, 50 per cent of the population is non-white. Yet will these so-called "ethnic" films reach a wide (read: white mainstream) audience? "People watch *Bend It Like Beckham* and embrace it because the story is so universal," notes Williams about the US \$32-million box-office hit. "*Kink in My Hair* is set in a Caribbean-type community, but any woman who's ever visited a hair salon will be able to identify with this story." The universal appeal, explains Williams, arises in the show's relationship between the Jamaican-born mother character and her Canadianized daughter. "One of my best girlfriends is Croatian. Me, talking about my Jamaican mother, and her, talking about her Croatian mother, have the same issues dealing with the generation gap." For Romeo Candido, *St. Jamestown* serves an additional purpose that hits home. "We don't want to shoot and leave. We want to return to our first agenda—of teaching the youth about media. We want to plant seeds."

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*Kink in My Hair*'s first-time director Tonya Lee Williams and Sheryl Lee Ralph.

