



Money Changes Everything

# It's the Five Producers

middle of winter in a year of big changes, and five producers gather to compare notes – battle notes, war stories. With the recent surge in films made by people of colour, producers are more important than they ever were. So we sit down with five who've already made a difference and are poised to do more. The backgrounds of these five producers are African and Caribbean, so that shapes their concerns. Some are currently accessing major agency funding. That shapes things too. It's the oldest truth in the world. Money changes every-

thing • Sudbury-born producer-director Alfons Adetuyi started out looking for money in the hard world of the Canadian private sector. In 1992 he directed the hour-long drama *Survivors* • Damon D'Oliveira is an actor, writer and theatre

director who moved into film producing at the Canadian Film Centre, where he produced Clement Virgo's short film *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul* • Karen King produced Stephen Williams's *A Variation On The Key 2 Life* at the CFC, having worked for years

as a commercials producer. Both King and D'Oliveira attended the Centre's Summer Lab program in 1991, initiated to get qualified filmmakers of colour through doors that had previously been closed to them. This year they've teamed up to co-produce

left, *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, produced by DAMON D'OLIVEIRA  
this page, *Tama Ba? Tama Na! Enough is Enough!* produced by DEBBIE DOUGLAS

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# ers Get Serious

Virgo's feature film debut, *Rude* • Debbie Douglas is a director and producer with I-SIS Productions in Toronto, with partners Gabrielli Micallef and Rose Gutierrez. She co-directed the video drama *AnOther Love Story*, and produced I-SIS's one-hour drama *Tama Ba? Tama Na! Enough Is Enough!* • Producer-director Claire Prieto is one of the groundbreakers in Black Canadian film. With Roger McTair she made *Some Black Women*, *Home To Buxton* and *Jennifer Hodge: The Glory and the Pain*. She's also the co-director of *Older, Stronger, Wiser* and *Black Mother, Black Daughter*, both made at the National Film Board. Prieto recently moved from Toronto to Montreal to take a position as Program Producer at New Initiatives in Film, the program for women of colour and Aboriginal women filmmakers at the NFB's Studio D • Our moderator is Geeta Sondhi, formerly an administrator and associate producer at the National Film Board, then a Perspective Canada programmer at the Toronto International Film Festival.

She now runs the Non-Theatrical Fund at the Ontario Film Development Corporation (OFDC). She is joined by Cameron Bailey in the following round table discussion •

**SONDHI:** In the process of finding funding did you ever feel that certain assumptions were made about you or your project in terms of the institutions or the agencies?

**PRIETO:** Oh, sure. The assumptions were that this was a Black project, and that it wasn't important, or it was small, it wasn't mainstream, it wasn't, wasn't, wasn't. And it's just by your sheer insistence that things happened at all. I think that's the work of a lot of documentary filmmakers. I have not yet produced a feature film, so I haven't been dealing with the likes of the OFDC and all of those people.

**BAILEY:** How is it when you are producing a feature film? Do you get the same response?

**KING:** We're getting our film funded through the Canadian Film Centre, so we're

not on the front line with Telefilm and OFDC. What we've faced so far is with distributors, trying to get them to see that the film can have more than just a Black audience, and that you can reach and affect people on a much broader level than that. But more than the expectations of the funders, we have expectations from our audience, from our community, who we're representing in our films. Is it politically correct, are we representing me, is that my father, my cousin...? A lot of responsibility is thrust on the shoulders of Black Canadian filmmakers, because there have been no films. Everyone wants to see themselves when they go to the movies.

**DOUGLAS:** Or maybe we take on that responsibility ourselves, and project it on to our community. I've been thinking about this quite a bit. And when I come to something that's not strictly documentary, something that's creative, I think I keep myself back, I censor myself, being afraid that the community wouldn't respond, wouldn't recognize



**Survivors, directed by ALFONS ADETUYI and produced by CLAIRE PRIETO**

the character as someone who's authentically Black.

**KING:** You can't do that!

**PRIETO:** It's like you stereotype yourself.

**KING:** What also happens now with the funding agencies is it's safer to give them what they expect.

**SONDHI:** What do they expect?

**KING:** They expect *Boyz N The Hood*. So if you write a story about the young Black guy who's balancing on the edge of crime and university, then you've got your movie made, 'cause that's what they know. "Yeah, yeah, Black people, they live their lives on the edge of crime all the time." Instead of being able to portray our reality, we're forced to make films that may not have anything of us in them.

**DOUGLAS:** I think that's true on the non-the-

racism – at first it was race relations – by people, educators, people in various ministries, working in different settings. And then in the recent past there's been some work around film, by the Black Film and Video Network, Full Screen, by different groups of people who do this agitating. So far as I can see, you need to do more of that. That always continues, and then you move forward a little bit.

The way I see people now, being able to go in and do something, I'm amazed at how fast things happen when you have access. Because it was never my reality that you could be a Clement Virgo, and in two years, go to the Canadian Film Centre and have a feature film being made.

So that's a big change, because I know for me it would've been 15 years. The peo-

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ple who are in there who are able to do things now need to understand how it happened, because there's also that pressure that says "I just want to make films, I don't want to be with this political bullshit." Well, it's the political bullshit that got this thing working at all.

**SONDHI:** How do you start changing that?

**PRIETO:** Working in film alone won't change film. There's been a lot of work around anti-

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**KING:** I also think there are two other ways to make a change. One is that those deci-

sion makers who hold our fate in their hands become more representative of us, and understand us, and not feel that "this doesn't fit my image of what Black people are, so this can't be right." I think there really needs to be more representation in those spaces: Telefilm, OFDC, wherever else.

I think we also need to start moving away from the Telefilms and the OFDCs and start looking within our communities and elsewhere for some kind of support for our work.

**D'OLIVEIRA:** And the other avenue too, is looking south, at the States. At the Toronto Film Festival we had three or four American producer/distributor types come up to us.

Based on the merit of Clement's short film, *Save My Lost Nigga' Soul*, they came up to us and said "Hey, we want to help you make your feature." And they hadn't even read it at that point.

There seems to be this thing in funding circles in Canada that you've got to do your obligatory 3.5 short films before you can move up a step to make a feature. I just don't buy that. In the States, it's a much different thing. It seems like right now, the other thing that's driving the mentality in the States is that there is a new genre of young, urban, Black films, and it's a market-driven thing, people are looking to make money. But I still think there's a bigger risk factor involved in the U.S. People are more willing to take a chance on a film.

**ADETUYI:** But there'll always be the risk-takers in the U.S. They make films for the world, there's money there, they want to exploit whatever they can. Coming back to our situation I was just thinking that we, as people of colour, have to ask for the money, that's the

bottom line. We need the money to be able to tell these diverse and complex stories about our cultures. And that's the problem, we don't have it. We don't have access to the money to be able to develop.

Outside of the various funding agencies, how many of us have gone to a private business and said "I want your money"? Do we think we have to go just within our own com-

munity to get money, or can we go where any other filmmaker could go? And do we have the skills to be able to ask for that money?

**PRIETO:** What we did was a combination, because I guess I thought that really, you have no power if you're always saying "Please give me." You need to be able to say as well, "here's my \$10,000, will you give me \$10,000?"

**PRIETO:** And I also know that part of the reason why Clement's film is being done at the Canadian Film Centre is, you decide that if Telefilm has two Black films there, they're going to do one. We're out of it. You don't go in.

**D'OLIVEIRA:** I think Clement thought about that quite seriously, because we knew that we could approach the agencies, especially after doing as well as we did at the Toronto Festival. But there was, on Clement's part, serious consideration about "Are they going to do two Black films?" Because he knew full well that Stephen Williams's film was going to be going through there as well.

But with the Feature Film Project (at the Canadian Film Centre), the money is in the bag if you get approval; you can get a cheque two weeks later.

**KING:** It's also a much lower risk factor going



A Variation on the Key 2 Life, produced by KAREN KING

and about institutional whatever, but I think this really shows how it works perfectly. You say, "I'm not even going to put this project on your doorstep and let you decide. I'll take the responsibility. I will not compete with Debbie." Well Christ, if I think my film is better than Debbie's, why shouldn't I compete!

was at the Black Film and Video Network. It was part of our mandate. We would encourage each other to pass on material, we'd have mini-seminars at our meetings.

**PRIETO:** I know there've been lots of phone calls to my house...

**KING:** So you moved to Montreal!

**D'OLIVEIRA:** I've had a couple of those calls, too, and I'm a big proponent of just do it, you know. You learn in the doing of things.

**ADETUYI:** You've got to be open with each other. I mean, you can't be paranoid about who's got what projects, especially when you're starting out. And after a while you're like, "Want to steal my ideas? Here they are!"

**PRIETO:** And the information that people are asking for sometimes seems unreachable to them, but it isn't, and also, it's public knowledge. That's the research you should be doing as a filmmaker anyway. You should be calling up Telefilm to say "I have a project, I'd like to come talk about it."

**KING:** The key is to demystify the process. Young people coming up, they have to get involved in projects that are going on. I mean all of us as young filmmakers need people to help us. We don't necessarily have money to do it. When I first came to Toronto I worked on Peter Mettler's *The Top of His Head* for something like \$25 a day. People have to be willing to learn that way. It's always been an industry of where you work your way up from the bottom.

And the other thing that I think of when it comes to our community is that there are so many different positions involved in the craft of filmmaking. I mean, a gaffer is an electri-

## There's that pressure to say "I just want to make films, I don't want to be with this political bullshit." Well, it's the political bullshit that got this thing working at all

to the Feature Film Project. We're talking about getting \$325,000. If everything goes completely wrong, that's only \$325,000, they'll forgive you in a year. If you blow a million and a half dollars, and your film bombs, they're not going to forgive you for five years. So it also gives everybody a chance to take a little bit more risk.

**DOUGLAS:** Let's talk about this whole idea of taking ourselves out of competition when we have a sense that the funders will only fund one of us.

**PRIETO:** That's a scary thought.

**DOUGLAS:** But I think that's really honest. I think many of us feel that way. If we know there are other projects, we try to stagger when we send in our proposals.

**D'OLIVEIRA:** They call it the *Masala/Sam & Me* story. Let's dig that dirt! Two great films go in to Telefilm, and one gets funded.

**PRIETO:** You know we talk a lot about racism

**DOUGLAS:** Well, I think it's from experience. Funders don't fund a whole lot of Black films; we're trying not to get anyone knocked out of the competition. And that's probably just arrogance on our own part to think that we won't submit because we'll beat out another Black filmmaker.

**PRIETO:** You have to start to put ten Black films in the face of Telefilm.

**BAILEY:** As far as producers of colour go, there are maybe a handful of others besides you in the country. What can you do, if anything, to get more people going?

**DOUGLAS:** I really feel a need for some kind of mentoring system. I know in my own work I've passed on my grant proposals that have been successful, and talked to people about how to put a budget together. You can help in those kinds of ways.

**ADETUYI:** One of the ways we did it initially



**Older, Stronger, Wiser, co-directed by CLAIRE PRIETO**

cian. If you're a qualified electrician, please, call me. The film industry has managed to keep itself so tight and so closed all these years; it's always been, you bring your nephew in, you bring your cousin in, so nobody else knows what a good deal they've got going there. Where else can you get 90 bucks an hour to travel home? I mean, it's unbelievable!

That's another thing that I'm hoping that we can do with this film is to say, come on board, we haven't got a lot of money, but it's an opportunity.

**DOUGLAS:** But then it's our responsibility as producers to go out and find those people.

**KING:** We will. But I think people also have to be aware of the fact that –

**DOUGLAS:** Are you setting them up in training positions?

**KING:** It's not even about training positions. If you're an electrician, tie me into this house.

**DOUGLAS:** But for me, it's important if you're talking about younger filmmakers, that we do create those positions so that someone who is going through college, or just coming out of high school, and is trying to work and pay for rent, is coming on and learning how to be a gaffer on your set, whether they're an electrician or not.

**PRIETO:** I've just always had a problem with not paying Black people.

**DOUGLAS:** I agree with Claire. Black people have been working for a long time, and women have been working for a long time without being paid. There's an expectation they would volunteer, but there are different

job programs around that you can attach to your film.

**KING:** But in this industry, white people volunteer. I mean, people who want to get into this industry do whatever they have to do to get in. And we have to realize that that's the way it is.

You know, a production assistant works for \$75 a day for 19 hours a day. It's slave labour any way you want to cut it. I know I sound awful –

**DOUGLAS AND PRIETO:** Yes you do... (laughter)

**BAILEY:** But I know what you mean. You have to balance that against the fact that Black people, particularly in low-paying jobs, are exploited all the time. Coming into a job like this, they might feel, "Well, I could go down the street and work at McDonald's for no money, so why would I want to work 19 hours on a set for that?"

**KING:** Because later on you get \$100,000 to do that on a film.

**SONDHI:** Closing question. I want to ask about the (Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto's) Racial Equity Fund, and the various racially motivated funds that are out there.

**PRIETO:** I'll be very quick. I think they're necessary, I think that's how women got anywhere. Policies need to be stated, there need to be specific movements forward, and that's one of them. I have no problem with it. On the other hand, there are some things about the whole equity thing that I don't like. It's not a plain, straight case. But unless

those things are legislated, unless an organization decides, and has a policy that says "we want these people, because they have not been there before," it's not going to happen. Straight.

**DOUGLAS:** But at the same time, I don't think we should allow groups like Racial Equity Fund be the only place where we as Black people can access funds.

**PRIETO:** Not for a minute.

**DOUGLAS:** And I'm always afraid that that's what's going to happen, that if you submit your project somewhere, and Racial Equity Fund isn't one of the places where you're going to get money, you'll be asked "Do you know about the Racial Equity Fund?"

**PRIETO:** And you say, "Yes...., but it's not for me."

**DOUGLAS:** Exactly.

**ADETUYI:** That's the great difficulty in trying to look at our needs as a community, and have those funds fit those needs as opposed to any particular political agenda at a certain agency. Like, with the Racial Equity Fund, the OFDC seemed to say, "We don't want to hand out the money, it's a hot potato. We'll give the money to you (LIFT), and then you can hand it out to those people."

**KING:** That's why they gave it to LIFT, because it's a grassroots organization, and people wouldn't be "intimidated."

**ADETUYI:** We would be too intimidated to go into the OFDC... (laughter)

**KING:** ...and take the elevator! To the third floor!

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**KING:** And the funny thing is that it's going to end. It's going to come to an end one day. And unless the things that have been done are everlasting policy changes, attitude changes, etc., we're going to be right back to square one, when multicultural money runs out, when the Reform party takes over this country.

**PRIETO:** I look at equity funds as a first tier. It's the way to get the push. Those things should not have to exist in the country on any ongoing basis. If they do, they exist because your country is still overrun by overt, covert, systemic – all kinds of racism.

**SONDHI:** Final comments?

**ADETUYI:** The only thing I want to say is that none of this is going to change until we connect with our audience. That's what's going to save us •