

The AFI Interview: AFI Alumna Deniese Davis on INSECURE

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Deniese Davis (AFI Class of 2012) is a producer on HBOâ??s INSECURE, which returns for its second season on July 23. AFI spoke with Davis to talk about her work on the show, which also features director/executive producer Melina Matsoukas (AFI Class of 2005).

Please introduce yourself to our readers, the AFI alumni community.

I was born and raised in Las Vegas, NV, where I fell in love with filmmaking in high school but had no idea what I was really doing, so I went to New York to attend Brooklyn College for Film Production and TV/Radio. It was there that I decided that I wanted to work in this industry as a producer and that led me to AFIâ??s Producing program.

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You are a producer on the HBO series INSECURE. Can you talk about that experience, and your creative relationship with Issa Rae? You also worked on AWKWARD BLACK GIRL.

As fate would have it, I first met Issa Rae two weeks before graduating from AFI when she was looking for a producer for season two of her web series AWKWARD BLACK GIRL. We immediately clicked and weâ??ve continued to work together ever since! Our creative and producing partnership is a rare and beautiful thing because we respect what we both bring to the table in terms of talent and skillset and neither of us wants to do each otherâ??s jobs. INSECURE was a tremendous learning curve since we both were coming from the digital space, but it was also very special knowing that it was such an incredible opportunity that we had dreamed of for so long.

Did you collaborate closely with series director/executive producer Melina Matsoukas, also an AFI alumna?

When we were crewing up to shoot the pilot for INSECURE, I was both the assistant to the line producer and our director, Melina Matsoukas. They essentially shared me and for my first experience in television production it was the best of both worlds. Melina and I got to spend a lot of time together and quickly bonded during production, so much so that she brought me onto BeyoncÃ©â??s â??Formationâ?• music video with her a few months later! I was bumped up to a producer when we received our series pickup but Melina and I continued to share an office together throughout production on the first season and have remained attached at the hip going into season two this year. She is one of the most hardworking and talented directors I have ever had the chance to collaborate with and I canâ??t wait to see her career blossom even further.

You also produced Sarah Gertrude Shapiroâ??s pre-UNREAL short SEQUIN RAZE, which she made at the Directing Workshop for Women.

I always joke that SEQUIN RAZE was the project that almost killed meâ?¦or, rather put my producing skills to the ultimate test. I had just started working on AWKWARD BLACK GIRL at the time and also had my thesis reshoots going out the very same weekend we were filming SEQUIN RAZE â?? which was a five day overnight exterior shoot. If I had to do it all over again I would do so in a heartbeat! I refused to pay myself on that project because I knew that every dollar needed to be spent on the screen, as I loved the story and wholeheartedly believed in Sarahâ??s ability to bring it to life. It was not an easy experience because of the grueling production schedule but itâ??s one of the projects I am most proud of and I continue to root for Sarah and all of the amazing work she has done on UNREAL.

What draws you to stories about powerful, yet often troubled, characters?

I have always been drawn to stories that have to do with women and our experience. I think partly why is because I was raised by a single mother alongside one younger sister. My mother embodied so much strength and power in my life but I was also subjective to her flaws and personal failures and that has always stayed with me from my childhood. Women portrayed in film and television are often one-dimensional and rarely get the chance to be seen as anything but the romantic interest and if they do, the story is still often written or directed by a man. I think itâ??s important, now more than ever, to try and change that narrative and if I can help that by producing more breakout projects that tell varied stories about women and *by* women then I will continue to do just that.

Are you returning for season two of INSECURE? What can we expect?

I am indeed! The cast is coming back so you can expect to see the same awkward moments, laughs and insecurities in everyone. I also love that our show is very current so you can definitely expect more pop culture references.

What else do you have coming up?

Issa and I have a first look deal with HBO so weâ??re developing other projects for them in addition to exploring the feature film world. Weâ??re also producing several other television and digital projects through our other company ColorCreative that exclusively focuses on supporting emerging diverse voices. We have a very busy year ahead of us!



(Source: afi.com)

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1. television

Date Created
April 14, 2017
Author
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