



Direct male: Sudz Sutherland subverts gender stereotypes in *Love, Sex & Eating the Bones*

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PROFILE

Production values

Back in the early 1990s, David "Sudz" Sutherland had the sort of menial job most writers secretly covet: he was a security guard in the Bay-Adelaide Centre. The work itself was stultifying, but while keeping one eye on surveillance cameras, the budding filmmaker found plenty of time to write. He also stumbled upon the inspiration for his first feature. After observing co-workers wallpapering the locker room with *Sunshine Girls* and talking freely about their porn habits, he got to thinking about the mass consumption of sexual images and how it might affect real-life relationships.

Love, Sex & Eating the Bones, which won best Canadian first feature at the Toronto Film Festival and is set for release this month, is about a security guard and avid porn consumer who, after nurturing an intense fantasy life, discovers he has trouble performing with a real woman. ("Eating the bones" refers to the West Indian custom of devouring meat to the bone and then sucking out the marrow, a metaphor for living life to the fullest.) The film is a romantic comedy, partly funded by Telefilm under its new directive to produce more mainstream pictures. But *Notting Hill* it ain't. With its reflective themes-male inferiority, stereotypes about black entertainment, overcoming self-doubt, how porn can distort our view of sex-the comedy posits Sutherland as a sly subversive. He wants to challenge audiences as well as entertain them, and his struggle to produce the film demonstrates how hard it is to make movies that are both meaningful and marketable.

When first shopping for potential backers, he met with resistance. While some thought the topic of porn was inherently unfunny, others thought the tone should be more farcical. Some thought the script needed a more typical Can-film treatment: bleak, detached, Egoyan-esque. Others were unapologetically blunt about its chances at the box' office. "People were like, 'Is this going to sell? No black-made film in Canada has ever made money, or attracted any audience,'" he recalls. Besides Telefilm, he eventually got funding from Astral Media, Citytv and distributor Think Films.

Sitting in World Class Bakers on St. Clair West, he recounts the process with a sort of bemused wit. With his scholarly black glasses, the lanky filmmaker exudes an understated intelligence and speaks with the authoritative calm of an overnight radio DJ. 'He lives just a few blocks south and often comes to this congenial café to eavesdrop on conversations, studying language and cadence to enrich his scripts.

Film has been a lifelong fixation for Sutherland, who acquired the diminutive Sudz in Grade 4. Children of Jamaican immigrants, he and his younger sister, Natalie, grew up in the Sheppard and Morningside area of Scarborough. His earliest memories of creative inspiration include devising western stories on his mother's typewriter and skipping school to see movies like *Rambo II* or *Purple Rain* at the local multiplex.

He took an interest in acting in high school but encountered obstacles. Because many of the plays were Victorian farces, teachers felt that casting him would jeopardize their authenticity "They said, 'It has to be a family, and it doesn't look realistic if there's a black kid there.' And I was like, 'Well, you've got a set that's cardboard. That's not realistic.'" He decided to write his own play and employ colour-blind casting. *The Coming of Age in Suburbia* was a kitchen-sink drama in which he played a randy youth who's denied access to the family car. He cast his friend Ed Robertson (a white guy who would go on to fame with the Barenaked Ladies) as his father.

Sutherland studied film at York, which is where he met Jennifer Holness, his wife and creative partner. She was on another career path entirely studying business and political science, with her sights on law school-but Sutherland's artistic passions won her over. Soon after, they founded Hungry Eyes/Film Food Inc., a production company whose aim is to explore black perspectives without being arch or pretentious. He handles most of the creative duties, while she acts as producer. In addition to *Eating the Bones*, they've created such works as the comedic short

Win/Loss/Tie and the documentary *Speakers for the Dead* (about the plight of black settlers in Ontario). They've also collaborated to produce two daughters-Rayne, who's two, and Daeja, nine months.

One of the prevailing conceits in Sutherland's work is challenging conventional portrayals of black men. "You never see a black man with a sexual dysfunction in a film", he says. He stopped directing music videos several years ago, having become exasperated with the accepted image of virile males flanked by submissive, big-bootied women. *Eating the Bones* was meant to subvert that stereotype.

He's also concerned with the societal roles of men in general. His first dramatic short, *My Father's Hands*, explored the ideological rift between a Jamaican émigré and his resentful Canadian born son. The title symbolizes not only the elder's toil but his propensity for corporal discipline.

"I'm not saying that the goal of my films is to end male violence," he cautions, mimicking the overblown tone of a TV pitchman. He merely wants to nudge men to confront their emotions. "As a man, I don't understand what I'm feeling all the time, and it takes me a while to articulate it. Whereas the women in my life, they know what they're going through. They'll articulate it- at length," he chuckles.

His next film, about an American college basketball phenom, will also confront the fragile male ego. After sustaining a career-ending knee injury, the protagonist begrudgingly agrees to coach a team of girls on a native reserve in Canada. Like *Eating the Bones*, the concept has room for comedy and social commentary.

"Everything is so safe and so tame, and so much about the opening weekend," he says, lamenting the focus of most film studios and the fact that they have more power than many countries. "There isn't a country in the Caribbean that is more powerful than Paramount. It is its own nation-state. It's very scary. But hey; he says with cavalier militancy, "we've got to fight, right?"

-Andre Mayer