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Far From Hollywood, Red Hook's Grit Sells

By APRIL DEMBOSKY

From "The Breakfast Club" to "American Teen," high-school dramas often star a familiar cast of characters: the princess, the jock, the nerd. In "Red Hook High," a new television pilot shot in Brooklyn, there is a different set of protagonists: the immigrant, the pregnant girl, the gay guy.

"It's the anti-'Gossip Girl,' " said Trac Minh Vu, the director of "Red Hook High." "It's the anti-'90210.' It's about real kids with real-life problems." "Gossip Girl" and "90210" are, of course, popular television shows featuring upper-class teenagers with Hollywood looks.

"Red Hook High" is set in a Brooklyn waterfront neighborhood that is teetering on the edge of gentrification. The actors are local teenagers, some of whom attended South Brooklyn Community High School in Red Hook, where the pilot was filmed. There was no script, just a story outline and character profiles.

The teenagers developed the dialogue themselves over the course of a seven-week acting workshop held after school. Mr. Vu found the students through three local youth arts programs.

"Since there weren't any writers, it made me feel like I was in charge of saying what I believe in," said Tabitha Cadet, 18, who plays Lenae in the pilot. "If I was to say something that I didn't believe in, I wouldn't feel right about portraying that character."

Mr. Vu said the students were often acting out the dramas in their own lives. "It's definitely skirting the line between drama and documentary," he said, "but staying firmly on the line of drama."

"Red Hook High" is one of 36 pilots chosen to screen this week at the New York Television Festival at New World Stages in Manhattan. The festival, which ends Wednesday, attracts top television executives looking for shows with commercial potential.

The best realistic outcome for Mr. Vu, he said, would be to serve as a consultant on a new network series based on his pilot. Last year, Mr. Vu directed "Dear Harvard," a teenage drama set on the Upper East Side that won the best drama, best actress and audience choice awards at the festival. This time Mr. Vu wanted to highlight a different kind of teenage life.

"If you look at the surface, these are the kids your parents warned you about," Mr. Vu said of the students at South Brooklyn Community High School, a public school that recruits troubled students from traditional schools. "They're maybe a bit grittier than a normal high school kid."

Mr. Vu developed the story lines for the pilot three years ago when he was a teaching artist at South Brooklyn Community High School. As he got to know some of the students, they told him stories that later

inspired the themes of the show.

“I would see a 15-year-old girl come to class and she'd be seven months pregnant and talking about her doctor's visit, then flip around and have questions about her English assignment,” Mr. Vu said. “One guy, who was always the goof-off, had a wicked story of being stopped by the police and had a pen jabbed down his throat to make him throw up because they thought he swallowed drugs.”

Mr. Vu created, directed, produced and edited “Red Hook High” on nights and weekends, when he was not at his day job producing internal video communications at an investment bank. He financed the pilot himself, which he said cost \$15,000 to \$25,000 to produce.

During a coffee break last week, Mr. Vu, who lives in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, sat in an office on the 43rd floor of a building in Lower Manhattan, overlooking the East River. He pointed to the red and blue cranes on the Red Hook shoreline, as one of the water taxis that link Manhattan and the new [Ikea](#) store in Red Hook headed across the river.

“Red Hook is historically a rough neighborhood,” he said. “The decisions these kids have to make are the kinds of decisions a lot of kids don't have to make.”

In the pilot episode, Peter, played by David Etienne, 17, lives alone with his older brother, John. They are Haitian immigrants whose parents are not in the picture. John lectures Peter to go to school, stay in school and finish school. Then he hands him a package wrapped in a brown paper bag and orders him to deliver it to his friend.

In another scene, Lenae and Star, played by Ms. Cadet and Tiffany Innocent, 16, decipher the directions on a home pregnancy test. Ms. Cadet, now a freshman at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, said that “Red Hook High” was more realistic than other teenage dramas on TV.

“I had friends who were in that situation, being pregnant,” she said. “There are so many teens that involve themselves with drugs, like a couple of characters were. I can relate to the whole thing.”

Ms. Cadet likes the way the show seeks to explain why youngsters miss school. And while the students deal with adult situations, she appreciates that they are also depicted acting their age.

“Other shows have scenes where they have kids trying to be older than they are,” she said. In one scene, Lenae and Star help each other with makeup. “We said, ‘Don't put that on, put that on,’ ” Ms. Cadet said. “That's what happens in real life. It's not like they grew up and it was in their DNA, how to put on makeup and use an eyelash curler.”

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