

## The Avenue

Written by Kayann Comeaux

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It was a cold lonely night in December and I was on the road for a speaking engagement when I received the call from writer/director Alaina L. Lewis.

Nothing new here – we speak often – but this call was to read for the role of Samaya Watkins, the lead role of her new film “The Avenue.” At first thought, I was unsure of my capabilities and the responsibility to carry such weight. I adore her work and honestly didn’t want to let her down. I asked her to send me the script, I’d study it and audition for her and the producer, Faith Udeh, upon my return. I’d put together a monologue to show my performance range and ability to transform, but this was a big deal in many capacities.

I simply asked her, “why me?”

The answer she gave was clear. “why not me, why not ‘The Avenue.’”

From that moment, the journey we’d all embark on is one that was as chilling as it was enlightening, and one that has lead me through one of the best experiences of my career as an artist.



“The Avenue” charts the arduous journey that a young man takes when he goes from the innocence of being a son to becoming his mother’s drug pusher. It is a highly dramatic thriller following a day in the life of Dru Watkins (played by Antonio Duke) when he is tasked with going

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out into the jungle for his dope-sick mother's drugs. It is then that he's faced with making the choice between serving the enemy that he knows (his mother played by me), or doing the "right" thing.

In order to understand Lewis' artistic mind, I needed to get in her mental playground to find out what inspires her as an auteur. Everyone who's viewed a clip of this film asks a unanimous question, "From where did the motivation come?"

Sitting over a caramel frappe I was granted the opportunity to pick the mind of one of the film world's most assiduous writers in her introduction to the world as director. Here's what she had to say.

**Insight News:** How did the concept for "The Avenue" come about?

**Alaina L. Lewis:** I was inspired to write the story "The Avenue" because of a relationship that I was in with a gentleman who was completely unlovable due to an issue he had with receiving and accepting love. This originated from the strained relationship that he had with his drug-addicted mother. "The Avenue" is moreover a unapologetic love letter to where this person's demise began and where he went left at that fork in the road. There's always an origin for when someone becomes emotionally unavailable, and with "The Avenue" I wanted to explore that moment.

**Insight News:** Tell us about Antonio Duke who plays Dru. How'd you cast him and what made you know he'd bring the character to life with such limited dialogue?

**Alaina L. Lewis:** The entire film falls on the shoulders of the character Dru. I needed someone who had a command over the things unsaid; someone well versed in the format of silent acting. Antonio Duke is like a spark in a generator. He brings chills to this role. He has the ability to say more with just his eyes alone, or slay your emotions with a simple glare. I intentionally did not give this character much dialogue, because essentially Dru is oppressed into silence. He does not have the opportunity to speak up for himself, because his environment is not conducive to his opinion mattering. How many people do we know like this? More than a few, unfortunately.

**Insight News:** What statement are you making with this film?

**Alaina L. Lewis:** I wanted to tell a story that I'd never seen before, and come out the gate as a director with the gloves fully off and apt to show people that I'm serious about my craft. I didn't want to play it safe with my storyline. I wanted to go all in with something that I think people will identify with. I hope it will challenge them to think about the "Dru" they know, and sympathize with him and consider how he became the way he is. I liken my decision to making this film, to what authors go through when perusing a bookstore and not being able to find the story they want to read, so they go home and write it.

**Insight News:** What impact are you trying to make on the independent film industry?

**Alaina L. Lewis:** I want people to know that just because I'm a woman, and a Black woman,

doesn't mean I have to write an urban romance, or a cliché urban flick. We can write psychological thrillers too, science fiction, etc. We can also visit storylines that you may be more accustomed to seeing written by a Caucasian male, as well as tell stories that may not encompass a Black cast. We can tell any story and every story, because stories need no permission to be told. Why set out to write within a barrier? I write what I want and what I see within my head. When people see my work, I want people to stay excited about the things to come because I'm never going to hit 'em with the same thing and will offer up an artistic variety.

**Insight News:** This is your directorial debut, how did you make this transition and why now with this film?

**Alaina L. Lewis:** Learning to direct just made sense to me. I went to college for screenwriting, and I had made several films during school and thereafter which I had to collaborate on with other directors who didn't always capture what I had written on paper the way I saw it when I created the story. When you write something and hand it off to another artist to take it to the next level, your work is interpreted based on their idea of your vision. That's what it means to collaborate. But, truth be told, you're not always going to see eye to eye with everyone, and it can at times be a painful process watching your words and idea's be cut up and stitched back together like a quilt that if you give your work to the wrong person, may look nothing like what you'd originally planned for. In essence, to safeguard my vision, I decided to stand up for it and see it through all the way to the finish line.

**Insight News:** What's next for Alaina L. Lewis?

**Alaina L. Lewis:** I'm ready to start pumping out more films, and at the same time allow "The Avenue" to do what it's going to do around the world. We've entered it into a few film festivals already, and have already gotten the news that we've been accepted to the Martha's Vineyard African-American Film Festival. I'm also working with my producing partner, Faith Udeh, to produce two feature films this year through our production company, 46th Street Films. Apart from that, I will still work with some amazing clients through my own company, Electric Heart Media, LLC, where I hope to continue trekking worldwide with my pen and my lens.

For More Information on "The Avenue" visit [www.theavenue-themovie.com](http://www.theavenue-themovie.com) .