

## Brian Ellison, filmmaker, *A Day in the Tr3*

### **The title of your film is *A Day in the Tr3*—what does “the Tr3” refer to?**

Tr3 is short for the Third Ward, one of the six historic wards in Houston. People in the neighborhood just call it Tr3.

### **Did you want to unite different art forms in your short? It seems very connected to photography, theater, and dance.**

I am a photographer. That is my first love and film is probably my second. I was actually inspired through film to be a photographer by Spike Lee. I was walking around New York two years ago, and suddenly I saw Spike Lee sitting at a café table. I felt to my knees in front of him. I said “Man, thank you.” Meeting him really inspired me to do what I feel tugs in my soul. This film is a representation of me doing something that I really wanted to do.

When I was four, my mother thought it was a good idea to take me to the movies with her. I remember being at theater, captivated by *School Daze*. I remember the movement, I remember the songs. That was when I fell in love with jazz and blues. That was the first time when I was exposed to different kinds of sounds like that. *Crooklyn*, *She's Gotta Have It*, and *Mo' Better Blues* are also my favorites. So I was inspired by film, and especially by Spike Lee, to add movement to my images. That's what the film is. There are pictures in the film that I have taken as photographs and I just added movement to them, so people can experience them for themselves.

*A Day in the Tr3* follows a young man walking through his slowly gentrifying neighborhood. He embraces all the day-to-day things happening around him that some people may look at as threatening, but they are also beautiful. If somebody tells you about a space and you never experienced it for yourself, you come up with all these ideas about it. So, they tell you that “the belly of the beast” is “so bad,” it's “so ugly”—then you don't go there, because that would be crazy, right? But then you go there, and you experience this angelic, authentic, raw beauty. That is what Third Ward represents. The woman inside the church dancing—she *is* Third Ward. She is so captivating, and yet flawed. Perfectly imperfect. That's what she represents. She embodies the people there and the beauty that hides in plain sight. The most important thing for me is to always see things with new eyes.

Also, we actually found the dancer, Starr Butler, at the last minute. We found her an hour—*an hour*—before we shot! She showed up, went to the set, and magic happened!

### **Who plays the protagonist?**

His name is Dominique Elam. I know him through a friend. His mother sells cookies and baked goods in the community. When I saw him, I knew that he was the one. He is a very eclectic, interesting person. He was not necessarily playing a role—he could just play himself. For me that was important because we live in a world that always tries to tell you to be somebody else. I told him, “Man, I just want your room to look like what it normally looks like,” so we just straightened it up a little bit. Most things there are a representation of him. He is into art, socks, different types of fashion. He dressed as he would normally dress.

### **Did you shoot this film after Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in August 2018?**

Yes, it was done after Harvey. We did it in October and shot the whole film in one day.

**I am asking because there is that derelict pile of rubbish lying around there in the film.**

## Full interviews with filmmakers Brian Ellison and Emmanuel Osei-Kuffour

Ezster Simor, June 2018

Yes, that is a representation of all of the piles. That was just one out of the many, many, many piles you can see on a regular basis around Houston. In some places, you can still find a pile. I definitely wanted to pay homage to the things that happened and the people that were affected by Harvey.

### **The film also has a religious undertone, I think.**

You are the second person who brought this to my attention. It was not purposeful. I think it is just a representation of the community. In a lot of neighborhoods you have a lot of churches in a certain amount of radius, in particular in the black community. You have a church on almost every corner, especially in the community I grew up in. Third Ward reminds me a lot of the community I grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which is why I really felt the need to do the film in Third Ward. I wanted to pay homage to where I re-rooted myself. The religious undertone—it was just there.

### **At one point, the boy in the film passes a building with a graffiti sprayed on its wall that says “You are enough.” What does that refer to?**

“You are enough” is a movement that I created to dive into a creative platform and to talk about mental health awareness in marginalized communities, where it is taboo. I used the three words “You are enough” to talk about how we are taught to always compare ourselves to others, and we are taught to feel inadequate. Social media and society in general constantly remind us that we are insufficient, we don’t have what it is to thrive in life.

I spray-painted those words there myself one day, when I was deeply depressed and I had to tell myself “You are enough.” I thought, if I have to remind myself that I am enough, how many other people have felt the same way? When I did that, it just took on a life of its own. That’s why the phrase “You are enough” is in the film. It speaks to a community where people are being uprooted, people are being displaced, people cannot afford to stay there because taxes are rising, and they don’t know who to talk to when they feel that they are being manipulated. There is so much negativity around us, and it’s important to have those positive messages in the neighborhood as a reminder.

## Emmanuel Osei-Kuffour, Jr., filmmaker, *Born with It*

### **How did living in Japan shape your career as a filmmaker?**

I actually got into film as a result of my time living in Japan. Originally, I really wanted to be a video game designer, which is why I got into Japanese culture to begin with. During college I did a study-abroad program in Kyoto, and I interned at an animation company. That's when I realized that I loved film, I loved storytelling, and that I understood what a director did. Because I was in Japan, I started to devour a lot of Japanese cinema. I was really into the type of characters that Japanese storytellers love to write about. Characters often felt like they didn't belong and that they didn't feel good enough—this theme seemed to be present in a lot of the work that I saw. I think a lot of it has to do with culture, and that in order to belong to a group, you really have to be accepted by your community. This was what really made me interested in film and in Japan at the same time.

### **Did this experience also inspire *Born with It*?**

Yes, *Born with It* is inspired by my time in Asia—I lived in Singapore and in Japan for close to ten years. In Singapore I experienced a lot of ignorance from people because I was darker. There is a lot of discomfort with dark-skinned people there. When I tried to decide what to do my next film on, I was thinking about those feelings. I wrote a story which eventually would become *Born with It*. Part of the reason I set it in Japan was because I started to wonder if the feeling that I had in Singapore was what half-black, half-Japanese individuals would also experience in Japan. I realized that that was most definitely the case. It was a little bit more heartbreaking in Japan for mixed race people, because Japan is driven by this notion that you *have to* belong to a group, you *have to* be the part of the community. It just feels a lot more painful when you are not accepted in Japan as opposed to any other country. There were a lot of people who were dark as me and they were just not seen as Japanese. I decided to adapt my story to Japan, and that is how the film came about.

### **There is a comment in the film about the difference in living in the countryside versus living in a big city. Is that based on where you stayed when you lived in Asia?**

I actually lived in Tokyo most of my time. I never lived in the countryside, except for those three months that I did in Kyoto during my study-abroad program. The reason I decided to set it in the countryside as opposed to the city is because I think my job as a storyteller is to heighten the drama. I have to make the situation for the character as difficult as possible so that the viewer is more connected to his journey. I think there are more ways for Keisuke (Dadie T), my main character, to escape his "battle" if he lives in Tokyo. There, you can always escape to a foreigner community—there are a lot of ways out. However, putting him in the countryside makes his situation more palpable and heightens his self-consciousness. I think at the end of the day, the main issue is that Keisuke needs to learn to accept himself. It is not about proving his friends that he doesn't have AIDS. It is not about gaining a friend, and it is not about getting an explanation from his mom about why he is so dark. It is really all about how he has to learn to live in the skin he is born with. The film is about him learning to accept who he is and how he is never going to be able to escape that.

### **Was the representation of bullying important for you because of your own experiences?**

I was thinking more about the idea of not being seen for who you think you are. I think I was trying to come to terms with my own personal experiences in Asia. My point really wasn't highlighting bullying in Japanese schools. Bullying is a means of showing how difficult it is when someone is different.

### **What was it like to work together with children?**

Most of my films have been coming-of-age films. I like telling stories about kids, because I think when kids experience adult issues for the first time, it can be really powerful. Children's thinking makes you realize things about problems you take for granted as an adult, like racism, xenophobia, discrimination, or identity issues. Children can really make us think about those problems.

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That's the reason I do a lot of films with kids. It is also a challenge, but a lot of times they would surprise me in ways that adults can't. At film school, they teach you how to talk to actors, to use certain tools and certain language to get good performances. However, with kids, it's different. They don't have any training and they are just being themselves. They are unpredictable from take to take. If you have your camera at the right place, you are able to capture raw, honest moments.

### **The film has beautiful cinematography. Why did you choose to shoot in winter?**

I'm very particular about visual style, locations, color, lighting, and even weather conditions. Before I started the film, I sent my cinematographer (Jeff Wong) and my production designer (Chiaki Kamimura, who did the art direction and set decoration) very detailed ideas about this film. I sent them movies or just screenshots from films, where I liked what the image felt like. I wanted *Born with It* to feel like as if somebody was looking back on a moment that he would remember forever—nostalgic and warm, but also like this is a moment of growth for my character.

### **Was it important for you to send out a positive message?**

Yes, it was. This is a dark and very honest story. It's resonated with most mixed race Japanese people who have watched it. For me, it would be easy to tell the story of a boy who just gets rejected and never finds his way, but I wanted to show hope. I wanted this boy to learn something from this experience. In the end, that's all that matters. You want to leave people with a sense of hope. That's what I want to do with all my films.

### **You mentioned that you used other films as inspirations. What are your favorite films?**

I love a film called *Tokyo Marigold* that was one of the references for *Born with It*. I love films by Koreeda Hirokazu—for example, *Like Father, Like Son*, or *Nobody Knows*, which is probably his most famous film. I like early M. Night Shyamalan too. *Unbreakable* is one of my favorite films.

### **Are you thinking about doing a feature film?**

Yes, I have an idea for a feature version for *Born with It*. I also have another film that I am working on that takes place in Japan, though part of it is set in Texas. It is about faith and how faith is seen in a predominantly agnostic culture, and how evangelical Christianity is viewed in a place like Japan.