

BBC Films & Lorton Entertainment presents

a **Silvertown Films / Wildgaze Films** production

a film by **Ed Lilly**

VS.

One Line Synopsis

A troubled foster-teen finds his voice, self-worth and a sense of belonging in the unlikely world of UK battle-rap.

Alternative One-liner

A troubled foster-teen is introduced to “no limits” world of UK battle-rap, where his aggression and sharp lyricism quickly makes him a controversial fan favourite.

Main Synopsis (48 words)

A troubled foster-teen is introduced to the “no limits” world of UK battle-rap, where his aggression and sharp lyricism quickly makes him a controversial fan favourite. But when he doorsteps his biological mother after twelve years in care, he’s forced to face his toughest opponent yet: his past.

Longer Synopsis (111 words)

Relocated back to his birthplace in Southend, troubled foster-teen Adam Watson is aggressive and out of control. However, when he meets charismatic promoter Makayla Lewis, she introduces him to the exciting “no limits” world of UK battle-rap where Adam’s quick wit and sharp lyricism soon makes him a fan favourite. Setting his sights on a match up with local battle-god Slaughter, Adam's lyrics become more controversial and he’s prepared to say anything to win - even if it means alienating himself from Makayla and his new circle of friends. But when he doorsteps his biological mother after twelve years in care, he’s forced to face his

toughest opponent yet: his past.

Introduction

Director Ed Lilly (Screen Star of Tomorrow 2017) has made a pulsating coming-of-age drama set amongst the outspoken, vibrant and “no limits” battle rap scene.

Troubled teenager, Adam Watson, has been bounced from one foster placement to another, and the 17-year-old is returning to Southend-on-Sea hoping to reignite his lapsed relationship with his mother, Lisa (Emily Taaffe). He finds a ‘family’, but not the one he expects, when he becomes embroiled with an underground community of battle rappers who express themselves through poetic verse, music and signifying.

In VS. Director Lilly creates a dynamic world full of action, humour and roasting. Touching on themes of family, gender and sexuality the film is replete with a series of unpredictable turns that challenges the posturing machismo image of the battle rap scene.

In the beginning...

“VS. is the story of a 17-year-old teenager who has been through the foster care system,” says Lilly. “Along the way Adam’s developed some behavioural and anger issues. This is the story of him finding his voice and his self-worth through the new and exciting world of battle-rap.”

The UK Battle-rap scene is a subject that Lilly became familiar with when he started his own directorial journey making low-budget music videos for rap artists. As he witnessed one rap artist deride the other in a war-of-the-words combat, he thought that it would be perfect fodder for his debut feature film.

“I love that for 2 or 3 minutes you are the most powerful person in the room and then for 2 or 3 minutes you are the most vulnerable,” says Lilly about the rules in battle rap leagues that dictate each contestant has to wait their turn. “That is a great premise for a drama.”

The director needed a script. So Lilly posted an ad on the independent filmmakers network website ‘Shooting People’ searching for a scriptwriter to collaborate with. Writer Daniel Hayes saw the advert. “Ed was looking for a feature-length film script, and his post included a link to his short film *The Hive* which had been commended by Andrea Arnold, a director whose work I greatly admire,” recalls Hayes. “He loved the writing sample I sent and, after a period of trying out a number of different ideas, we arrived at VS....”

Lilly and Hayes split the scriptwriting duties to match their individual strengths. “Ed generally took the lead on the battle-rap sequences and I concentrated on the foster-care strand,” says Hayes. “We would give each other feedback and then re-write our own material, but as the screenplay developed we both re-wrote each other’s scenes.”

“I sent him a lot of online links,” says Lilly, as he attempted to bring his co-scriptwriter up to speed on the dynamic battle-rap scene. “Dan was struck

by how clever, witty, funny and intelligent the young people were and how there was such good camaraderie and a community feel.”

“People are quite surprised by what battle rap is in the UK now,” says Lilly. “It’s a-cappella, it’s pre-written, which is very different from the freestyle on beat stuff they have seen in films like 8 Mile.”

“Ed sent me a link to an infamous battle between Blizzard and Grist and what struck me was how creative, skilled, intelligent, witty, and downright funny the battles were,” recalls Hayes. “There was a strong sense of self-awareness and camaraderie in those videos, battlers laughing at themselves and saluting their opponent when they delivered a particularly impressive put-down. It wasn’t pure aggression and the technicality of the wordplay was amazing.

Hayes also did his own research looking at internet clips of battle rap performances. He came across a video of a school pupil who had been bullied and was then put into a battle rap with his aggressor. Hayes was blown away; “Fifteen scathing bars later, the victim had demolished his persecutor and gone from isolated outsider to school legend.”

This video helped the writing duo knuckle down and work on ideas for Adam, the principal character of VS.... Hayes saw the film as, “A ‘fish out of water’ story, about a teenager who has never fit in, utilising his existing word skills to find his place an unlikely new world.”

Hayes adds, “Adam became a troubled foster kid wrestling with anger and identity issues. We envisaged the piece as somewhat of a ‘Trojan horse’ -

using the tropes of an underdog sports/music film while using that as a vehicle for a coming of age story where we could touch on some deeper issues about parenthood, sexuality, and identity.”

Alongside working on the battle rap arc they began to develop the foster care storyline. “Dan has experience supporting foster care teams and social care teams, that’s what he has done as a job, and he has also worked in a youth club supporting young people.”

Hayes talked to a wide range of people to make sure that the foster child story was as authentic as possible: “For this strand we consulted a number of social workers with experience in fostering, youth offending and leaving care teams. It was actually one of the social workers who suggested that someone with Adam’s history would more likely be placed with a single, older, slightly quirky female carer. Fiona [Ruth Sheen] might play up to the ‘mad cat lady’ stereotype, which Adam finds quite disarming, but beneath that she’s exceptionally wise, shrewd and empathic.”

Trying to establish the personality of Adam’s mother, Lisa, was a more protracted process. “It took us a long while to find a balanced version of Lisa's character,” says Hayes. “In the end we tried to strip things back and keep her empathetic but also nuanced. There was a lot of discussion about her impossibly difficult decision to put Adam into care and how her life had progressed in the intervening years.”

They approached the battle rap scenes with the same level of detail. One of the challenges of writing the script was to ensure that the battle rap lyrics

were of the same high standard seen in clubs and leagues that host battle raps.

“We met with Rowan Faife who is the co-founder of Don’t Flop which is the largest battle rap league in the country and he came on as our lead consultant,” says Lilly. “I wanted to get a writing team together because I wanted to show different sides of battle rap. Adam’s style develops across the film, so initially we wanted people who were a bit funnier and then people who could write more aggressive on-beat rap battle bars. We got a team together of 4 of the best UK battle rappers including Rowan, Tony D, Shuffle T and Gemin1.”

The decision to choose Southend, with its seaside attractions and its colour was made by Lilly: “Firstly, I’m from Southend. Also we wanted to try and progress the teen culture genre forward by avoiding certain things that have been done before. We wanted it to be regional and not to focus so much on gang and knife crime.”

The co-writers LILLY and HAYES approached Wildgaze Films about the project, where budding producer Bennett McGhee was an executive and had started to take on projects to produce himself.

“It was pitched to me as a rap battle drama,” says McGhee. “I was aware of rap battle but didn’t have any real insight into the scene. Reading the script, I was gripped by how surprising and fresh every new moment was. It also broke down many of the preconceptions I had about the genre.”

McGhee immediately saw both the visceral potential of the story and the enormous drama. Shortly after, in 2015, Bennett left Wildgaze to set-up Silvertown Films to pursue producing in his own right and Finola Dwyer and Amanda Posey of Wildgaze remained on the project as Executive Producers. He initially approached BBC Films who were quick to board the film and develop it with the team. Bennett then brought on Lorton Entertainment to complete the financing.

The search for the actor who could portray Adam began in earnest, someone believable as a vulnerable teenager who could also stand on their own two feet in the harsh world of battle rapping. Lilly was wowed by Swindells first audition which was an open audition in which Ed saw over 250 people for the role, both trained and untrained actors. Lilly said of Connor's audition, "At the improvised open-audition where we first met Connor, he immediately controlled the group with his quick-wittedness and commanding presence. He didn't have to shout or fight for attention, the other actors were just naturally drawn to him and we could immediately see he had an innate star quality."

When Sian Smyth, Connor Swindells' agent, received the script she immediately saw the unique opportunity it presented for Swindells to showcase his ability and range. Nonetheless Swindells, who was 20 at the time, was sceptical about whether he was the right fit to play Adam; "Reading the breakdown for the role, I thought there is no point in going into the audition. It was a part for a 17-year-old kid and the character breakdown said you must have battle rap experience. My agent convinced me to go, telling me that at the very least it was a great opportunity to meet Julie Harkin, the respected casting director."

The audition was spectacular. It confirmed to Lilly that he had found the actor that could carry the movie and Connor was called back for a one-to-one script read with Ed. “As Connor was reading the scene with Julie it became clear that he was drawing on his own personal experiences. By the time he got to the end of the page he let loose and broke down.”

Swindells connected with Adam on several levels. He had lived through some similar personal agonies as Adam and was able to bring these experiences and memories to his interpretation of the character. “Adam’s story rings true in so many ways and I relate to him a lot,” says Swindells. “My mum passed away when I was 7. My whole life I’ve struggled with abandonment issues. That’s Adam’s biggest problem: this fear of abandonment. The fear that everyone is going to leave him and everywhere he goes he won’t be accepted. When I read that in the story I knew that was something I could tap into and give.”

In contrast to understanding Adam’s emotional journey, Swindells also had to ape his character in learning the vernacular and the nuances and mannerisms needed to perform in battle raps. ““I had a week from coming off another job to become as best a rapper as I could,” recalls Swindells. “I worked with Rowan from Don’t Flop who went through every single rap and every single line and basically taught me how to do it. The hardest thing was the on beat stuff, because the a-cappella stuff you can get away with but there’s nowhere to hide when you perform on beat.”

After returning to Southend-on-Sea Adam meets the charismatic and elusive 19-year-old local promoter Makayla Lewis who inducts him into the battle-rap scene. Makayla becomes the object of Connor's affection but maintains a professional distance as their friendship unfolds and her own sexual identity is revealed.

Lilly was enthralled to be able to work with the inimitable actress Fola Evans-Akingbola. "Fola was able to bring those different sides to Makayla. We had lots of discussions about her backstory, her history, what's going on outside of what we see in the film. Fola takes on so much information and uses it in her performance."

"When I first read the script what struck me about Makayla was that she is a leader in a male dominated, hostile culture, but she has an undeniable warmth and liveliness," says Evans-Akingbola . "I was interested in the fact that she grew up in Southend, that she had built this Project Battle community with her friends. I was intrigued about her businesswoman motivations and interested by how she embraced newcomers like Adam, rather than rejecting them, because they were outsiders."

She also had to give herself a crash course in the UK Battle Rap scene. "It was important to me that I knew as much about the battle rap scene as possible because Makayla is so in love with it herself and founded Project Battle with Odds (Elliot Barnes-Worrell). The hosting style at events like Don't Flop has a casual confidence – the hosts present to camera, interact with and control the crowd and the battlers."

A huge help was that two of her fellow cast members are great musicians in their own right. “We were lucky enough to have the amazing Paigey Cakey and Shotty Horroh in the cast, who are both talented musicians,” says Evans-Akingbola. “Shotty is a sublime MC who had already made his mark in the UK and international battle rap scene. Working with them in their element during the battle scenes was a special experience, because their talent made us all raise our game.”

In the director’s mind, there was only one candidate to play the role of Slaughter, Adam Rooney aka Shotty Horroh. “I’ve known Shotty for about ten years. We made several low-budget music videos together. I always had the idea of Shotty in the role despite the fact that he hadn’t acted in a film before. “

Shotty Horroh has racked up over 20 million views on YouTube. The clips showcasing his fierce battling and lyrical styling have made him a viral favourite across the planet. “Shotty is one of the best UK battlers, possibly one of the best in the world, so we knew he’d bring that authentic performance element and make those rap battle moments so much bigger and better,” says Lilly. “There was a question as to whether he could bring the level and quality of acting that we needed but as soon as we started working together in rehearsals he threw himself right in.”

Lilly knew that to find someone to play Missy, he needed someone with the stature and skills to be believable rapping against Shotty. “Casting Missy was going to be a massive challenge because I was keen to find someone with legitimate rap skills,” says Lilly. “I didn’t want to cast an actor and teach them to rap. It was a tough call and it was actually Rowan who mentioned

Paige to me first and I had a look and saw her videos and so we offered her to come in. And when she came in we then realised she had acting experience already.”

Paige Meade aka Paigey Cakey has appeared in BBC’s ‘Waterloo Road’, international cult sci-fi horror flick ‘Attack The Block’, and Jesse Lawrence’s The Knot. “Paige just got better as the shoot went on,” says Lilly. “She’s such a pleasure to work with, she’s very friendly and a very popular member of the cast. She’s very unassuming, innocent and sweet and then she starts rapping she takes on this whole other persona. She’s very in your face, very aggressive, very on the front foot. ”

“When I found out about the musical aspect of the role I was super excited,” says Cakey. “Being able to act and also showcase my rapping skills was literally a dream come true.”

Not only does she act and rap with aplomb, her writing ability was also an important tool to ensure that Missy had a distinctive female voice. “For all the rap battle scenes, I wrote all my lyrics,” says Cakey. “I really took time to work on my punch lines. I watched a few of 'Shotty Horrohs' rap battles on-line as I knew he would incorporate this style in his character 'Slaughter'. This gave me quite a bit of inspiration and helped me piece together my flow, metaphors and punchlines.”

There was a big debate on how to incorporate the female characters into the script. “The audiences for battle raps, although they are quite diverse and mixed in age, the number of female audience members is very low,” says Lilly. “It’s a male dominated culture. One thing Dan and I wanted to do

was have good prominent female characters in the world with Makayla and Missy”

Evans-Akingbola was particularly impressed by the many layers of her character Makayla. “Nowadays I often feel people are writing what they call ‘badass’ female characters that are often just as one dimensional as the ‘damsel in distress,’ she states. “In the harsh world of battle rap Makayla could easily have been written as a hardened and tough young woman with nothing else going on, ‘the badass’, but I feel that it is a testament to Ed and Dan that they wrote Makayla to be a young woman who can maintain her kind heart and welcoming energy in a tough world, but that she can also stick up for herself and be a leader - she is no doormat.”

In developing complex female characters Lilly looked beyond the misogyny of the world and at the homophobia that forms the basis of many of the bars that are being spat during the raps. “I think there are homophobia issues, misogyny issues and sexism,” says LILLY. “So we wanted to try and engage in those issues in the film and not shy away from how hard the lyricism is.”

This sexism is especially prominent in the battle rap scenes. Lilly says, “Whenever you get a male and female battle rap each other gender issues are going to come up, it’s part of it, it was a really difficult balance to find a way of plotting the story so that you can have these really absurd, but very strong homophobic and misogynistic rap lyrics and then try and create an overall theme that is not homophobic and not sexist within the story. You wouldn’t call a UFC fighter or boxer a criminal for assaulting their opponent in the ring, it’s a sport, and it’s the same for battle rap.”

The answer was to create a love affair between Makayla and Missy that avoids fetishism and is organic to the story being told. It also changes the dynamic of the characters as Slaughter's understanding of the situation ensures that he's more than just a pantomime villain. "We flipped the characters on the head," says Lilly. "A lot of people will say, 'What I say when I'm battle rapping are not my personal views'. So it's a grey area. You can't simply call a battler rapper who says homophobic and misogynistic in a battle rap, misogynistic or homophobic. Away from the battle rap they may act very differently and that is what we wanted to do with the Slaughter character."

This complexity is also shown in how Evans-Akingbola approached Makayla's sexuality. "I didn't want to think about it in black and white terms," explains Evans-Akingbola. "I didn't want to put her in a box because I felt Makayla wouldn't do that to herself or others. Honestly, I still don't feel clear on if Makayla is gay or straight. Thinking about it like that feels too binary. What I did focus on were her feelings specifically for Missy and how it would feel to suddenly be confronted with strong feelings for a friend, especially when you are part of a culture where everything is potentially fair game for punch lines and bars. I knew if it were me I would want to protect that love fiercely."

In terms of creating the very contemporary aesthetic of the film, Lilly was excited when he was introduced to cinematographer Annika Summerson. "I was really impressed with her previous work, she's very contemporary and has great ideas," says Lilly about meeting her. "We knew that we wanted to create something that could appeal to a wide audience. We wanted the

shooting style to be quite commercial in its simplicity and we didn't want to go too gritty we wanted there to be colour, light and vibrancy. Quite a lot of it is quite saturated and goes against the usual mould for urban films."

Another piece of the puzzle was how to best represent the vibrant and diverse fashion of the UK battle rap scene. "We had an amazing costume designer called Grace Snell," says Lilly. "It was really tricky role to fill because it's a niche fashion, not a lot of traditional film costume designers will know a lot about this style. We looked predominantly for stylists who worked in music and commercials and we found Grace, not only did she get the young fashion, but her dad is also a social worker and so she had great ideas for Terry and Fiona."

"Before I researched individual characters I researched the rap battling scene," says Snell. "I learnt as much as I could about who goes to watch and what they wear. I went to battles & watched loads online. I also researched other genres of music like the massive UK grime scene. It is so varied. I didn't want to stereotype or make these roles caricatures. It was important to be inspired by lots of different genres of music. When Stormzy played at the Brixton Academy I went around asking to take peoples pictures. I have a whole photo album of great outfits from that gig."

"I loved collaborating with Ed," says Snell. "I'd decorated the fitting-room with floor-to-ceiling magazine cuttings and pictures, it helped break the ice and gave us all something to visualise when I was putting together outfits. I have close family ties with social workers so for Terry I took a lot of inspiration from people I know. I didn't want to portray a social worker with socks & sandals because that's just not real."

Then she put together the costumes so that they felt like they belonged to performers in the UK and outside of London. “I would say that the UK has a very unique approach to marrying music and fashion particularly in the urban & grime scene. But it is not as concrete as that and it shouldn’t be,” says Snell. “The UK rappers are very loyal to their brands and wear a uniform that feels very natural. But due to how connected we are to the world via Instagram and online content, inspiration and trends pop up quicker than before.”

Lilly concurs, “I think it’s hard to pin down what is urban fashion because there are so many different looks now. There is a broad range; lots of people wearing different stuff so you just have to try, with your characters, to present them each with their own style.”

Cakey states that the fashion choices said a lot about the personality of Missy; “My clothing choices were quite bright and bold. My character was very confident and street wise so her clothing had to match her persona.”

The mix of a young, fresh and diverse cast who reflect a contemporary young Britain outside of the usual London centricity makes this feel a very immediate and vital voice within the UK film landscape, where films with and for young British audiences are poorly served.

On completing the project, Altitude Films Entertainment, who have had recent success with British independent films including the BAFTA nominated *Lady Macbeth*, have picked up the film to distribute in cinemas in the UK and will release the film this Fall.