

THE RADAR PEOPLE

BY MATT LEE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH CLAUNCH

POETIC JUSTICE

Poet Malik Yusef hits the silver screen with Hollywood Jerome

"I've actually had the luxury of meeting Al Pacino over Caprese salad, and, in reality, he's kind of quiet and reserved," says Chicago poet Malik Yusef, 35, as he paces around a friend's kitchen just hours after wrapping filming for the short-film version of his acclaimed spoken-word poem *Hollywood Jerome*, which will premiere in Chicago later this month.

The point? In reality, Pacino has little in common with his thug character Tony Montana in *Scarface*—a film that has, somewhat oddly, managed to capture the imaginations of countless young people of this generation. For most, it's not a difficult distinction to make, the gap between Hollywood and reality, but for some vulnerable young people, getting the two confused can be disastrous—and this just the point that *Hollywood Jerome* is trying to make.

Shot at locations across Chicago during a beyond-hectic week in July with a \$100,000 grant from the Independent Feature Project, *Hollywood Jerome* tells the tale of a young man from the South Side who becomes enamored with the gangster lifestyle portrayed in movies. By trying to emulate the lifestyle he sees on film, however, Jerome is doomed to never make it out of Chicago. Grammy-, Emmy- and Peabody award-winning Yusef, along with director Frey Hoffman, 31, plan to screen *Hollywood Jerome* at film festivals around the world, as well as in Chicago classrooms to help foster a dialogue about the troubling issues it addresses.

"We've partnered with Rachman Consulting Group to create a curriculum that integrates the story line of the film with a work book," says Hoffman. "So when *Hollywood Jerome* shoots his way out of a situation, the kids can skip to a section of the movie where the actor who played him will discuss why the character choose to shoot, and what some of the alternatives might have been." The pair also plan to produce a stage version



Poet Malik Yusef and director Frey Hoffman.

of *Hollywood Jerome*, also to be performed at schools in Chicago.

Hoffman and Yusef were both born and raised in the city, and South Side native Yusef's poem was originally inspired by kids he knew growing up. Interestingly, both of their lives have been, and seem to be destined to be, intertwined with Hollywood and the entertainment industry: Yusef is a longtime friend and collaborator with Chicago entertainers Kanye West and Common, and has been featured on MTV and HBO, while Hoffman was the director of photography for West's hit video "Jesus Walks," as well as Yusef's video with West and Common, "Wouldn't You Like to Ride," which was featured on the *Coach Carter* soundtrack. It wasn't until Hoffman, sitting in a friend's basement, saw Yusef performing *Hollywood Jerome* on TV, however, that it occurred to him a film version of the poem—perhaps, in the future, even a feature film—would work.

Don't expect the duo to get caught up in the glitz and glam, though. "They say Hollywood is the dream factory," says Yusef. "But it's the fantasy factory." ■

Hollywood Jerome will premiere at the IPF awards banquet Oct. 30. www.ipf.org