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HEADLINE: 'Slam' drama finds reason in rhyme

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TORONTO - When actor and poet Saul Williams entered the Washington, D.C., prison where much of "Slam" was filmed, he got a warning: Stick close to the guards.

"The first thing the warden said when she saw me walking with (director) Marc Levin was, 'You don't need to stray too far from Marc, because you are going to get mixed up with these prisoners and someone's going to drag you to their cell. You fit right in.' "

Williams soon concluded he fit in for a reason.

"I realized it is not random when everyone in a prison looks like you, is around your age, has a similar background," he said.

"People ask me, 'Were you afraid in there?' No! I felt a connection to those people inside. If anything, it made me fear the outside that has whatever infrastructure that leads those people who all look like me into this prison."

Williams, 26, sits cross-legged on a hotel couch with his shoes off and his hands in his lap. In his loose purple pants and rough cloth shirt, he looks much more the poet than someone's idea of a criminal.

In "Slam," opening Friday in Houston, Williams plays a street poet named Raymond who lands in prison on a drug charge. Before he is released on bail to await trial, he meets an outside teacher who is trying to help inmates learn to improve themselves.

This woman helps him focus his poetic abilities, leading to his participation in a poetry "slam," where he finds an audience for his artistic drives.

Williams, who has participated in poetry slams - he was discovered for the part at a slam - was concerned that many people come away from the movie thinking a poetry slam is a certain type of poetry.

"A slam is a competitive poetry reading. Very simple.

"Like if I were to take Shakespeare and (Alfred, Lord) Tennyson and e.e. cummings and throw them on stage and say, 'OK, you guys have three minutes each to recite a poem. The audience is going to boo if they don't like it and yeah if they do, and we are going to choose three members of the audience to judge you between the scores of 1 and 10. May the best poet win.'

"That's all a slam is: It's a competitive poetry reading. It's not a new style of poetry. It just puts time restraints on the poetry you recite. You can get up and read prose, you can do an entry from your journal, you can do rap.

"It's basically a poetry reading for people with short attention spans," Williams said, laughing.

Although he no longer participates in slams, Williams, who has a master's degree in acting from New York University, believes that the growing popularity of these vigorous poetry events is a positive development, partly because of the way it brings so many people together.

"It's the most diverse, multicultural scene I can imagine," Williams said. "You'll find aging beat poets who are, like 'Poetry is back!' and an 18 year-old girl who just discovered she's gay. You'll find everything."

Trimark, the film's distributor, has promoted the concept of slams as a substitute for urban violence, and to some degree the movie seems to present that idea.

"Well, I don't think it's meant to be taken as literally as that," Williams said, although he believes in the preventive power of "people investing in themselves." As such, he said, "Art is of the utmost importance.

"When people look into themselves and find whatever helps them find their voice and have a way to channel the energies that flow through them - have some type of release - then they are not looking for that other (violent) release."

By the way, Williams wrote the poetry he recites in the film, as did his co-stars, including the real inmates in several scenes. But Williams was not too thrilled about it. Because his character was new to poetry, Williams used poems he had written years ago, material he said that does not represent where he is now in his writing.

Williams first book of poetry, "The Seventh Octave" (Moore Black Press) will be followed soon by a second book of poems, "She."

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