



PHOTO *Bruce Talamon*
[Courtesy of Southern Cross the Dog]

STEPHANIE ALLAIN (OF SOUTHERN CROSS THE DOG) BY SARAH VANCE

Black Snake Moan producer Stephanie Allain puts the focus on storytelling.

Independent feature-film producer Stephanie Allain has a clear vision about how to work with writers when she is developing material. “I try to get what their intentions are and make sure those intentions are successfully communicated. And if I don’t get it, then I ask a lot of questions. I try to clarify the vision of the filmmaker. If a script can move you, if it can make you cry, then it’s working on some level.”

Rather than developing an idea for a movie with a team of writers, Allain prefers to work with writer-directors. “Material written by writer-directors seems to come more fully formed because it’s from one mind,” she insists. With *Hustle & Flow*, *Something New* and *Black Snake Moan* topping her list of credits, Allain, a former studio executive turned successful independent producer, knows the language of script development. “I like to initiate questions that will help the writer clarify

an idea for a movie. But I think I’m attracted to a higher caliber of work.”

After a brief stint in the dance program at the California Institute of the Arts, Allain realized she needed more intellectual stimulation, so she went to work in San Francisco as a writer and dancer. Her first pregnancy brought about the decision to move back to Los Angeles and get into the film business. “Analyzing material came really easy to me,” Allain says. “My first script-reading job was at [Creative Artists Agency]. The best thing about being there was the connections. Mike Ovitz was running the joint, and it was the most powerful agency in town.”

One of Allain’s contacts at CAA eventually introduced her to Amy Pascal, who hired her as a story analyst at Fox. When Pascal moved to Columbia Pictures, she hired Allain as a story analyst again. “She said if I worked for her as a reader for a year, she’d promote me

through the script, I called the agent and said, ‘I have to have this.’ The ending was more of a downer than it is in the movie, so we did work on that. But it was already a page-turner. I knew I was in the hands of a true storyteller.”

At the time, *Hustle & Flow* writer Craig Brewer had made only one digital video project called *The Poor and Hungry*. “I knew he wanted to direct, so I watched it. And it blew me away. I felt the same way as when I read the script of *Hustle & Flow*,” Allain says. “I knew I was being masterfully manipulated by this incredible writer.”

As a writer, Brewer tends to put working-class, “marginal” characters in the spotlight of his stories. *The Poor and Hungry* is about a car thief who pulls out a cassette tape of cello music from a stolen car. He becomes obsessed with the music, and he tracks down the girl who was the owner of the car, and they begin a relationship. “The idea of music as salvation

“Before I was even halfway through [*Hustle & Flow*], I called the agent and said, ‘I have to have this.’”

his story. My main thing is to find out what the movie is about thematically. Once that’s clarified, then the scenes become self-evident. It’s important to know what your ultimate statement is, so I start there.”

A New Orleans native, Allain enrolled as a pre-law major at USC in 1977 before transferring up the California coast to UC Santa Cruz. “I went to USC before I realized that I was an artist. The campus was way too straight for me. I was into writing, art, film and dance, and UC Santa Cruz was much more groovy at the time,” she adds.

Allain graduated with a degree in literature and poetry. “Because I have a background in classical literature, when I’m attracted to material it’s usually because it’s an example of strong writing. I’m not as attracted to a great idea for a movie as I am to a great execution of

to creative executive,” Allain recalls. “That’s exactly what happened. I never would have gotten a toehold without a mentor. And I don’t think it’s a mistake that it was a woman who said, ‘You’re smart and I think I can use you.’”

Allain was working as a creative executive at Columbia when she met a young USC student named John Singleton. “John was reading scripts at the time, and I’d heard about his coverage,” she says. “So I brought him in. But as soon as he started talking about his script, *Boyz n the Hood*, I knew he was filmmaker.”

After gaining invaluable “deal-making” experience as president of production at Jim Henson Pictures, Allain branched out on her own, working as a freelance producer. She found the script for *Hustle & Flow* in a pile on her desk in 2000. “Before I was even halfway

really stuck with me because it’s just such a beautiful notion that imagination and creativity can save us—which I really do believe,” Allain says.

After securing the rights for the script, Allain’s struggle to get *Hustle & Flow* made was just beginning. “I didn’t know that the script had been all over town and everyone had passed. It quickly became apparent that it wasn’t going to be easy. One of the biggest problems we had was the fact that Craig was white and he was writing about black people. When they realized he was the director, people got scared. They felt that it wasn’t politically correct. But my feeling was that if he can write with such compassion and humanity about these characters, he obviously knows them. God forbid that people start saying that black people can’t write about white people.”

