

**York brought together the couple behind the hit film  
*Love, Sex and Eating the Bones*. BY MARTHA TANCOCK**

**A** lot of people don't think there are black people in Canada," says director and screenwriter David "Sudz" Sutherland, who grew up in Scarborough. When he and his wife, producer Jennifer Holness, tried to raise \$2.5 million to mount their first feature, *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones*, potential backers told them it would flop in this country. You can't have two black leads, they said. Make one white. Don't show Canadian money, they said, if you want to reach an American audience. And what's this about the lead character having a pornography addiction? Forget it.

But after three years of hard slogging, the filmmaking duo finally found the money and shot the film their way. *Eating the Bones* was released March 5. Before it even hit commercial theatres, the romantic comedy defied nay-sayers and won a host of awards at independent film festivals, including Best Canadian First Feature at the 2003 Toronto International Film Festival. Toronto movie critics loved it. The *National Post's* Jason Anderson called it "sly, raunchy and very, very funny." *The Globe and Mail's* Rick Groen said it's better than a promising first try, it's a "fulfilled feature." The characterization, he added, is "neither

colour-saturated nor colour-blind, but just bubbles up with a simple effervescence that seems uniquely Canadian." Yes. Canadian.

That's how Sutherland and Holness intended it. Children of immigrant Jamaicans, both grew up in Toronto and stayed there to forge careers as independent filmmakers. In the early 1990s, fresh out of York University, they formed a production company and began making music videos for local rhythm and blues, reggae, hip hop and gospel singers. Then they made two award-winning shorts: *My Father's Hands* (1999), based on Sutherland's difficult relationship with his father, and *Speakers for the Dead* (2000), a National Film Board documentary about descendants of black settlers in Priceville, Ont., searching for their roots. Inspired by Spike Lee, the couple aim to make movies that reflect the black Canadian experience.

*Eating the Bones* (a metaphor for getting the most out of life) also dares to mock black male stereotypes. "Usually the black man in film is a compilation of super masculine menial, Mandingo and buck nigger," says Sutherland. "Not Michael." No, the protagonist is a security guard addicted to porn and unable to rise to the occasion when he falls in love

with a real woman. But his colour is ultimately irrelevant, says Sutherland. "It's a story about a human being which I hope is universal."

Their next feature mixes up cultures and expectations for laughs and that human touch. An American college basketball star reluctantly agrees to coach a team of native girls on a northern Ontario reserve after his career is cut short by a knee injury. *That's The Way the Ball Bounces*.

Sutherland and Holness fell in love at York. He was studying film and she was studying political science. When she graduated with a BA in 1992, he left with one more year to go. She was "on the way to being a deputy minister" before he lured her into moviemaking. He does the writing and directing, she negotiates the contracts and handles the budget. Though they often collaborate – they also have two baby girls – they have forged separate careers writing, directing and producing for television. For Holness, raised by a hardworking single mom and originally intent on law or business school, film hadn't seemed like a career choice until she met Sutherland. But "going to York really helped shape my world view," she says. "It made me understand that more was possible than I realized." ■