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HEADLINE: Slam' cuts through prison bars

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BODY:

Where others saw bars, Marc Levin saw the window of opportunity to make "Slam," an unconventional dramatic film about poetry and prison life set in Washington, D.C.

Levin already was in jail making a documentary about a street tough dealing with convict life when he approached the warden about filming a fictional tale along the same lines.

"She said, A Hollywood movie?" "And I said, Not exactly, but with actors."

Not exactly, indeed. Levin is a left-of-center filmmaker whose documentary "**Gang War: Bangin' In Little Rock**" impressed both street youth and law enforcement officials alike.

"Slam," his first dramatic film, is a mosaic about a young black writer-rapper from the D.C. housing projects who is arrested on a petty drug charge and sucked into the vortex of the criminal justice system. It forces him to consider how to change his own future and that of his community for the positive. The title is also a play on words, a reference to the spoken-word poetry slam phenomenon that is a hybrid of rap, poetry and performance art.

The lead character's rap-style poetry finds direction from a prison social worker and a place in the slam scene. He is played by Saul Williams, an award-winning performance poet, who wrote his own

poems for the film. The social worker is played by poet-actress Sonja Sohn.

"Slam" was filmed in D.C. after New York turned it down. What Levin found in the nation's capital was a Department of Corrections that felt abandoned and neglected in a city struggling with the Congress for home rule. That frustration and a need to get their story out made them willing collaborators. In a meeting with the all-black group of prison administrators the reaction was "that the media had ignored them and no one cared" about their lack of resources and the issues of overcrowding, recidivism and the social problems that cause them.

"They said, Who would believe it was two middle-aged Jews from New York? But so be it."

Levin's partners, co-producer Richard Stratton and co-writer Bonz Malone, gave the film street credentials. Stratton served eight years in federal prison for marijuana smuggling. He is a founding editor of Prison Life magazine and a freelance writer. Malone is a columnist for Vibe magazine and a former graffiti "artist" who spent time in jail as a teenager.

Getting cooperation from street and establishment sources was critical, Levin said.

"As long as you are working in good faith and with a sense of camaraderie and respect then you've got someone covering your back," Levin said. "Someone is always going to challenge what you're doing but then you've got others there who will support you. It's like a team."

Levin said the story had gestated for years but clarified when he was in D.C. making "CIA: America's Secret Warriors" for the Discovery Channel. After spending the morning with former CIA chief Richard Helms and the afternoon in the D.C. jail Levin was struck by the dichotomy between the power elite and the powerless.

"It was really like two different worlds. I couldn't believe no one had made a movie that juxtaposed" life in the city's majority black

community with its symbols of affluence and status, Levin said.

Filming in prison was an always tense and often dangerous experience. When a mini-riot broke out the crew was thrown into a cell for protection. When the warden learned they didn't get to film the outburst, she staged a riot drill for their benefit.

Another time she gave them just one hour to film a critical scene where Williams' character defuses a violent situation with words. It was shot in the yard with 150 prisoners present "and some of those guys out there had an attitude. And they were not about to be told anything like be quiet or move there."

The result "was a scene that feels like it's about to explode," said Levin, who said the warden acted "like she was a studio executive. She was invested (in the process) totally."

One of the film's most ironic moments is when D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, who went to prison for drug use, plays a judge sentencing Williams' character and lecturing him for his crime.

Barry had befriended fellow former convict Stratton and volunteered for the film saying "I've been there myself and I want to help. It's a story close to my heart," Levin said.

His performance represents a political culture that has declared a drug war but whose only answer is to imprison young black males, Levin said. And if it seems like Barry's anti-drug speech in the film is "the height of hypocrisy," said Levin, "that's precisely the point."

GRAPHIC: Photo 1

Saul Williams, an award-winning performance poet, wrote his own poems for "Slam." Photo 2

Marc Levin Photo color

Sonja Sohn and Saul Williams star in "Slam."

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