

# Features 1: Battle Los Angeles – An Interview with Adetokumbah M’Cormack

March 2011

*By M. Corece Smith*

The upcoming movie *Battle: Los Angeles* seems like the next big-to-do (or see) in Hollywood Cinema. It has the right ingredients: stellar director, star cast, special effects, an edgy cinematographic style, and a hefty budget for heavy promotional materials—check any website, bus stop or technological gorilla style ad. Though you will have to see the film to know what the battle is actually about.

Born in Sierra Leone and raised in Kenya, Adetokumbah M’Cormack has a lot of pride in being African and African-American. He boasts graduating magna cum laude with a Bachelors of Fine Arts from the prestigious SUNY Purchase College Acting Conservatory. In our conversation he discusses portraying Corpsman Jibril Adukwu, how this movie is different from all other sci-fi movies, and how President Obama has increased awareness of Africa.

MC:Talk a bit about *Battle: Los Angeles*. What’s the premise of the movie?

AM:Well the premise of the movie is a war with aliens. You have the whole movie being shot from the perspective of one Marine platoon that is, basically, Los Angeles’s last line of defense against this invasion. It’s epic. It’s huge. It’s startlingly realistic in the sense that it’s almost shot documentary style; you just follow the one group you don’t cut to the white house or some other random place in the world. It’s just really gritty. It’s heartfelt.

MC:What other movies would you compare it too?

AM:I would say it is most like *Black Hawk Down* except the enemy is, of course aliens. It has elements of *Saving Private Ryan* in it. I would say it has a bit of *Hurt Locker* as well.

MC: In the past a lot of Sci-Fi films have dealt with the idea of doomsday and alien invasions, what exactly makes this one any different?

AM:The fact that it’s hand-to-hand combat. It’s urban combat. You actually get to see these Marines fighting with this enemy. You also get to see that the aliens—in regards to the armies—are similar to our military. They have lieutenants; they have corporals and medics.

MC: So a different type of personification of an alien species?

AM:Yes it’s very similar. It’s very real and it doesn’t feel like this abstract random thing. It feels like a real fight here on earth.

MC:I want to ask—continuing the conversation about specifics in this film--“they say” Black people often die first in Hollywood films [Laughs]. Is this film that different? I mean often times people of color in general are seemingly already dead in these types of films or just do not exist, aside from the token character or two. Does this film break those standards?

AM:[Laughs continue] Well I can't give too much away obviously but the refreshing difference is that ethnic groups are strongly represented in this film. You have the Latinos—Ramon Rodriguez and Michelle Rodriguez are both in the film. You have Black representation with Ne-Yo, Corey Hardict, Neil Brown Jr., and also myself—you have a few of the Caucasian characters as well. We are really well represented in the film and you'll be pleasantly surprised to see who makes it and who doesn't. I think we keep people guessing throughout the entire film.

MC:Who is your character in Battle: Los Angeles?

AM:I play a navy corpsman [Adukwu] so basically my character is a medic and my job is to save as many lives on the battlefield as I can—both civilian and military. I get to fight the aliens as well which is pretty cool.

MC:Describe your character's particular role in the arc of this film.

AM:Well the thing about the marines is that they don't really have medics so they enlist a navy corpsman—so I'm from the navy—to go along with them into battle. My character has been with these marines before, fighting along side them, so my character comes and help the wounded or send them back if they are too hurt. Eventually everything just completely falls apart when the alien species comes and I end up not just being a medic but being called into battle.

MC: What physically, mentally, or otherwise did you have to do to prepare for this role?

AM:It was a lot of research. Every one of our characters had to do a lot of research. Three weeks prior to filming we went to boot camp where we all slept in a tent and woke up five in the morning. We had to run two and a half miles, do hundreds of situps and pushups and jumping jacks and what not; we had to get ourselves physically fit like marines but we also had to get to the mindset of marines, like speaking the same terminology as marines. A lot of

it was very arduous and it was really physically demanding but I got in the best shape of my life. However, people got broken hands, I suffered a concussion, people chipped their teeth. Out of all of the lead characters most of us had to be hospitalized at some point. But at the end of the day we loved it and hope we portrayed the military in an accurate way.

MC:Did you have any inspirations for the role?

AM:I used several people actually. I spoke to actual navy corpsmen and asked specific questions about what I would do in certain situations. The script changed quite a bit because the director wanted some things to look more realistic so I would have to ask how my character would respond in those situations. I also read tons of books and talked to doctors as well.

MC:What was it like working with director Johnathan Liebsman?

AM:Johnathan Liebsman is an absolute genius. I had a blast working with him and it was interesting because he tried to paint a picture initially and we didn't really get it until he showed us a presentation with exactly what he wanted then we got it; after that we decided to trust his vision and I'm glad we did. I think that it is very realistic and very entertaining.

MC:So you were born in Sierra Leone and you grew up in Kenya?

AM:Yes, I was born in Sierra Leone—I lived in Nigeria for a bit—but mostly I grew up in Kenya.

MC:What is it like being Black in Hollywood but also being from another country, being African? What is it like engaging this mega-business with all of your identity layers?

AM:It's interesting, it's actually really interesting. I think that I definitely share the African American experience being the fact that I am Black but it's always interesting because I am also very much an African. When people meet me—before I open my mouth—people often assume I am African American. At the end of the day I guess I actually am when you think about the true definition of an African America. I wouldn't say there are any major differences because my life in Kenya wasn't very different. I lived in the capital, Nairobi, so I had friends from all over the world so for me coming here there were no major differences in

my lifestyle so to speak.

MC: On that same point do you feel like you have a more wealth of roles because you can confidently play someone who is from Africa and play someone who is an American born African or African American?

AM: Yes I can do both but what's interesting is that I feel like a lot of people are so intimidated because my name is so African so they wonder can he really pull off an African American role? Of course I can, it's just I have this long intimidating first name. As an actor I wouldn't say there are more roles available to me but I like to do it all.

MC: I get a sense that people are more comfortable with someone who is African (born in an African country) playing someone who is African American versus an African American playing someone who is African born. What do you have to say about those perceptions?

AM: Well this is the thing, I think ultimately actors are actors and if you can do the role justice, be it an African American playing an African, and as long as you've done the research and figure out what accent is appropriate for a particular country and find out what is needed I don't think it matters.

MC: How do you feel about the way Africa is depicted, at times, in films? For example, we often hear or see Africa as one culture and we see a continuous pan-African identity. Do you feel like you have a responsibility to point out the vastness of Africa?

AM: Absolutely. You know I think my biggest issue is when I say I am from Sierra Leone—well I have a friend who I told I was from Sierra Leone and he said wait a minute that's a country? I thought that was a poor girl who had her arms amputated in that Kanye West video. [Laughs] I think there has got to be awareness that Africa is a continent that is comprised of lots of different countries with unique cultures. I think it helps that your President is from Kenya so I think that raises a little bit more awareness that African isn't just one "dark" continent.

MC: What's up for you after Battle: Los Angeles?

AM: I think I'm taking a more film path—not that I'm abandoning television—I'm going to

do more producing a project I wrote and I'm looking at some scripts and a film that I co-produced that I will also star in that we plan to shoot in Africa.