RUN
on Hulu

Daniel Fajemisin-Duncan and Marlon Smith:
Creators/Writers

British writers Daniel Fajemisin-Duncan and Marlon Smith have known each other since high school in south London, where they connected in their late teens over a mutual love of movies and storytelling. Although they made a few shorts together at the time, the two followed different paths and it was several years later they decided it was now or never, and poured all they had into the making of their short online pilot, Run, along with co-creator and director, Jonathan Pearson. The pilot caught the attention of executive producer Jaimie D'Cruz (Exit Through the Gift Shop), a 4-part miniseries order from the UK’s Channel 4 followed and 2m viewers tuned in for the first episode, which aired in 2013. Fajemisin-Duncan and Smith went on to win Screen International’s Stars of Tomorrow Award (2014), the Royal Television Society’s Best Drama Writer Award (2014) and the BAFTA Television Craft Award for Breakthrough Talent (2014).

Full of adrenaline, at times darkly comic, Run is a tense crime thriller that features 4 interlocking characters with peripheral connections: Carol (Olivia Colman), Ying (Katie Leung), Richard (Lennie James) and Kasia (Katharina Schüttler). Confronting their own harsh realities, they barely register the effect they have on each other’s lives. Filmed on location in south London’s Brixton, where Fajemisin-Duncan and Smith grew up, the show feels hyper-real. They give a voice to the marginalized and tackle issues from illegal immigration to homelessness and addiction; it’s far from easy viewing at times, but Run is smart, raw and rings true.

Our editor Sharon Rapose chatted with her fellow native south Londoners by phone.

Sharon Rapose: I’ve watched both the online pilot and the full Channel 4 series and loved them. I can see why you’ve done so well with Run.

Daniel Fajemisin-Duncan and Marlon Smith: Thank you, thank you.

Sharon: Did you always intend for the characters’ stories to interweave? And, did you already know that thrilling ending from the very beginning?

Daniel: Actually when we first started, our connections were even more subtle. Our characters had really small links, really tiny. As we went through the development process, we upped
them a bit more, but still kept them very subtle—what affects the next character is a small action. Or sometimes the lack of an action, like between Episodes 1 and 2, it’s that Carol doesn’t arrive to meet Ying that sets her off on her journey. When we were about to shoot and going through the scripts, we came up with the idea to just kind of ‘pinch’ it together at the very end, putting together the 2 characters in the same space, yet having no idea how much they impact upon each other’s lives. That was one of the major themes of the show: how we’re all connected and don’t realize it, and how much of an effect we have on each other. We pass people every day who we probably wouldn’t even look twice at, and we have no idea that we may have had an effect on their life, or they may have had an effect on you: the kind of unknown, ricochet effect when you have so many people close together. And we felt our theme embodied that, in a very singular way. But that ending wasn’t something that we came to in the start, that came in the process.

Sharon: I understand you were influenced by the movies Amores Perros and Babel—not just on Run, but in general?

Daniel: Without being too on the nose, it’s like: if we occupy the same space, it’s natural that the actions, the things we do in our lives, the choices that we make are going to have some kind of ricochet effect on other people. And we just wanted to show the effects of that. I think these movies, and particularly what Babel was saying was—and it’s so relevant for right now—as the world gets smaller with globalization, every kind of action, everything we do is going to affect someone. A message I write now on Twitter is going to be read in a country in Africa, or somewhere in the States, and have some kind of effect, you know? Those themes really spoke to us, and on a personal level. In particular because Marlon and I identify as being Black British, though we have a mixed race and multiethnic background; it can sound a bit confusing, but we identify with both. And so, stories—especially Guillermo Arriaga’s work and Iñarritu’s work—with this kind of international flavor speak to something universal, in all of us.

Marlon: I think those films as well, they shine a light on certain communities and people you don’t often see. For us, that was important. We filmed in the actual area where Run was set, but usually you see a certain type of character in drama or films, coming from such areas. We wanted to show there are different communities, different people, different things going on here. That’s why it was particularly important to have Ying in there, because she is a character who’s very familiar to people in this area, and a lot of people wouldn’t know exactly what’s going on, unless you pull back the curtain and peer into those lives. Babel does that very well, and really spoke to us particularly because of the multicultural aspects of it.

Daniel: And although those writer/directors are from Mexico, which feels like a very different culture in a way, with its own set of rules, codes, music, language, and so forth, Amores Perros could be anyone, that could be anywhere in the world. Even though they look different, spoke different to you, you related to them, on the deep, universal level. And that’s always been something that we’ve been about, in all the work that we do. In particular, with our
background, having family that spans different cultures and different countries. You start to see what connects, rather than what divides.

Sharon: Yeah.

Daniel: And that's another reason why those films had a natural influence.

Sharon: They're universal stories.

Daniel: Exactly. It doesn’t matter where the people are from, you just identify. And I guess in terms of diversity, Babel—it’s just very in vogue at the moment. I think the more we can show diverse people, we show: yes we’re very different, but also we’re very much the same. It sounds a bit cheesy but it’s so true. The more you can do that, I think you can help to move towards a better type of culture.

Sharon: I’ve heard you recommend that emerging writers forge ahead by producing their own work—which in your case led from an online series to a drama series commission. That’s every TV writer’s dream. With such a large volume of material online, how do talented writers cut through the noise?

Daniel: Funnily enough, the online pilot didn’t actually go online until the show was commissioned and went on air. We did the traditional thing of being on TV and then it went online. The intention was for us to put it online, but we got to Channel 4 and they said, “We’d rather expand it into a TV show first, before that happens.” So the strange thing is, in around 2007 we came up with the idea for the show, and the online pilot you saw, we funded ourselves. And that was at a time that was very different to where we are now. There were few webisodes around, it was all very low budget. Netflix, Amazon and Hulu hadn’t gone where they’ve gone. But we were trying to do something like that way back then.

Sharon: So you shot it first, and then it was held back?

Marlon: Yes! It’s almost the reverse of what you do now, where you put stuff on the net, you get a million views and you go viral and so on, and the next steps come after that. With us, it was kind of the reverse. It was always our intention to put it on the net, but we managed to get it in front of a few people before that, and all of the noises coming from them were, “This should be a TV show, and a longer format.” So, we never ended up getting to that stage!

Daniel: Mainly because people saw the potential. To cut through the noise, whether it’s intended to go online or not, I think standing out is what matters most. What we were doing with the online pilot, our style of how it was done, and again, the rawness and the boldness, was something that hadn’t been seen for a while, or people hadn’t seen a lot of, so that’s why it immediately stood out. It came at a time that drama—more gritty, social realist drama—wasn’t really in vogue any more. And I think we kind of showed that it could come back, but it could be entertaining as well, and exciting and insightful and not exploitative.
Marlon: I think what Daniel said about standing out is a big thing. At the time that we made it, a lot of stuff on the net had weak production values...there was a certain approach to that kind of content. And we almost approached it like we were making a film. We shot it on film, we had a proper crew, really put all the money behind us into it, there was a difference in our approach, I think, to a lot of stuff that was happening at the time.

Daniel: There were a lot of comedies, weren’t there, that people were putting out there, or handing in to broadcasters?

Marlon: Yeah.

Daniel: In a way, hard hitting drama just wasn’t where it is now. We were very lucky that as Run was going through its traditional TV development, drama had a resurgence. Television in particular had a resurgence, that grew into VOD platforms and we’re still riding that wave. Cinema has also shrunk, and everyone has kind of filled the void with great television. We came just on the cusp of that.

Sharon: It’s also the adrenaline of the show. You were able to combine that edge of the seat tension with a simple—well maybe not so simple!—but a very personal story.

Daniel: I think simple’s the right word. I know it can be a byword for unsophisticated! [Laughs] But we like simplicity, it was purposefully simple.

Sharon: Yeah!

Daniel: But as you say, we wanted to combine that grittiness with being on the edge of your seat. And no-one had really done that, at that point.

Sharon: I was wondering, with the online pilot, why you decided to split it up into 6-minute sections and go for a serialized format, rather than a 25-minute short film, which could have gone the film festival route? It could have done very well that way also.

Daniel: At the time we were making the online pilot, as online drama wasn’t what it is now, webisodes were what people were talking about, that was kind of the buzzword: 5-6 minute webisodes that people could watch on their smartphones, which were just becoming more popular. A lot of those were... cats falling out of trees, comedies, typical YouTube clips. But we really wanted to use that form for drama. And again, no-one was really doing that at the time. So yeah, the idea was the 4-parter online pilot was meant to be like an entire season.

Marlon: That was like the early days, you get the extreme versions now where people’s weekends are watching an entire box set, or whole series online. But back then it was the very early days of, you’d be on the underground and you’d see someone watching on their iPhone. People wanted instant gratification, almost. A short, sharp burst of entertainment. And the online pilot was a challenge we were excited by, that we could set a series in 24 minutes. It gave people that hunger as well, to come back for each episode, and want more.
Sharon: As you had already been collaborating for a while, what was it about Run that made you want to develop it into a web series, rather than other stories you were working on?

Daniel: I think it was actually our co-creator on the show, Jon [Pearson], who directed Episodes 3 and 4. He started out as a commercials director and still does some, and he's pretty up on the latest technology. We were doing the traditional short/feature film route, which is still valid, tried and tested. But, because of the new technology that was coming out at the time, you could watch clips on your phone or an iPod touch type device, plus digital cameras were becoming better quality. Jon had basically done a few ads and virals that were really cheap and cost effective. And so he said to us, "I think we can use this to do something online." In terms of all the ideas we had, this one seemed the most apt for that route. It was more, again, about the story fitting the form, and we went from there. Because we did and still do have other ideas, but they needed more time to breathe. They were essentially feature film ideas squashed into a short film, whereas this one, because of its kind of episodic yet serialized nature of what we had in mind, fitted the form more.

Sharon: In terms of moving to the writing of the Channel 4 miniseries, did you write with ad breaks in mind, or did you write as if each episode were a 45-minute film? Or a 4-hour film!

Marlon: No, we wrote with ad breaks.

Daniel: While it can sound like, from an artistic point of view, you don’t want to think about commercial breaks at all, you just want to tell your story and it will have its natural peaks and troughs—you don’t want to be dictated to by some soft drink commercial!—there is something to be said for writing to an ad break. Because it allowed us, and it’s something we learned, to sharpen the story and the characters: to really work towards the point, and really focus your story.

Marlon: I think the [online] short was great practice as well. Because it taught us each segment was its own short film too. And it kind of trains you to have the strong beginning, middle and end in each 6-minute segment. Just like ad breaks, you don’t want the viewer to go away and change channel, go make dinner or a cup of tea or something. You want to keep them on the edge of their seats, have that cliffhanger, so we thought of each segment as its own short film; Part 1 of the online pilot has its beginning, middle and end, and so on. It’s great training as a writer.

Daniel: That’s a really good point. When we got to development at Channel 4, the larger episodes—they were 42 minutes, but 55 minutes with the commercial breaks—it’s as Marlon says, those became even more of a challenge, but really cool as well, to tell a mini story in those parts, but also push along the story, at the same time. It was very good training. There are a few things we have in development that might go through a VOD platform and not traditional television. And for these, we would do the same. Even though on Netflix and Amazon you don’t go to commercials at all, I think for us it always makes the story better, to cut it up into those sections. It certainly shows you what’s working, and what’s not.
Sharon: How do you see story structure evolving in the future? Do you think writers might keep to the familiar forms, or experiment more?

Daniel: It would depend on what the story is, but I think there would be a natural inclination to move towards a structure. In terms of our experience, splitting up into 4 is very similar to splitting any story into 3 act breaks. Within those acts, they’re split up as well. I think naturally, you work towards that. Depending on the story, you may not be forced to have literal cliffhangers at the end of every part, because no-one’s necessarily going to go away, but you’re still going to want to push a certain number of scenes into a sequence that end on a particular point, that then flow into the next sequence. So yeah, I think it’ll be a mishmash of both: of what’s traditional, and what you can do with that form, if you do have a whole hour or 45 minutes with no ad breaks. You could just keep going and going, but I think you would naturally arrive at that point.

Marlon: I also think it’ll be down to the writer. Writers like us, we like character-based genre pieces. And there’s a certain energy and a pulse to most of the projects we’re writing on. Whereas you’ll find some writers who are a bit more existential, who might take full advantage of the fact there are no advert breaks and there is no structure—it’s almost novelistic, in a way. But I think me personally, and maybe Daniel as well, there is a natural structure that we take.

Daniel: You want to keep your story moving and embody your work with an energy.

Marlon: Really writer-dependent style. I could imagine someone like David Simon [The Wire] not writing to what we would think of as natural story breaks. His style can be quite journalistic and novelistic and take a different flow—not that I’m comparing us to David Simon! [laughs] But it’s totally dependent on the style.

Sharon: How do you approach the storylines in your writing—from theme, character? In Run there are some incredibly compelling themes.

Marlon: I think it always starts with character. We—me, Daniel and Jonathan—came up with a multitude of characters, and people who interested us. We’ve always been interested in outsiders, people who are living in the outskirts. That gray area between morally what’s right for them, which might not be right in the eyes of a regular person. It just always generates from that main person, like an image. When we were talking about the characters for Run, we saw a guy in a cinema who was identical to the person that Richard [played by Lennie James] became in Episode 3. For me, anyway, that’s always the genesis of the work.

Daniel: Yes, especially on Run, that’s exactly how it happened. In terms of Marlon and me—the way we work—Marlon is definitely 100% character. But I do think, myself, I have a tendency to think about story in addition to character. It depends, for me. However, like Marlon said, we always come back to character. Capturing that narrative, and how that story flows, are not going to go further until you know that character at the heart of it. If that character doesn’t work, you just have to throw that out and start again. So, I think for Run it
was 100% characters, and on other projects it’s been a bit of both. But it always comes back to character.

**Marlon:** And then, just to talk about theme—it’s interesting, because we’ve worked with and spoken to writers who start with theme. And we’ve always found that fascinating, because... I don’t know, we don’t ever really start that way! [laughs] It feels so upended if you start with theme, because you might find a really good path that you hadn’t come across before, but if it doesn’t fit with your theme, you have to abandon it! It feels restrictive.

**Daniel:** Whereas, yeah, if we’ve got a balance between story and character, the themes will kind of come to you. They’ll speak to you at some point. And some are kind of obvious, from the get-go. But we found, going through the story, themes spring up like a well out of a ground, and surprise you. I think it’s always good to be fluid with theme.

**Marlon:** Theme can sometimes put you in handcuffs; there have been plenty of times when we’ve been in the writers’ room, or storyboarding, and we’ve seen there are many avenues to go down with story, and there have sometimes been other writers who are like, “No, but that doesn’t fit the theme.” And we’re kind of like, “But this is a great story! We’re missing a great story and a great opportunity!” [laughs]

**Daniel:** Yeah!

**Marlon:** We always try to put ourselves in the seat of the audience. And we’re only going to do things that we would watch. I think many times, we’ve walked away from a great piece of work. When the story’s perfect and structure and the characters within it, then we talk about theme. But then I guess it’s a personal thing, everyone’s different.

**Sharon:** Looking at the differences between US series and British series, the American shows are often more aspirational and escapist, and *Run* for example is unflinchingly realistic, though there is always still a degree of hope. Do you think that difference is cultural?

**Daniel:** Maybe... In terms of social realism, there are such American stories, I’d say mainly literature, still with pockets full of hope. In the mainstream, of course, the US is known for hopeful and happy endings. But I don’t know if that’s cultural...what do you think, Marlon?

**Marlon:** I don’t know, sometimes I think in Britain with the shows and films that we make, sometimes it’s almost... a shyness to be hopeful! [laughs]

**Daniel:** Yeah. Fair enough!

**Marlon:** We don’t enjoy being cheesy, or even admit we’re good at something, whereas under the US banner it’s great to be a hero. Over here there’s a shyness, rather, a reluctance. A reluctance to marvel at ourselves.
Daniel: You’re right, it is cultural when I think about it. If you look at British tabloid culture, we love to build someone up and tear them down. If anyone’s getting too big for their boots, we’ve got to kick them off their pedestal. Whereas in America that pedestal’s something to actually aspire to, as opposed to denigrate. When I think about it, in my family, I feel that it comes out of the fact that socialism post-World War II was very dominant in our society, that idea of fairness is very ingrained in us. Because prior to that, in terms of the British Empire, class was and still is a major issue. Anyone who looks like they’re aspiring to great heights might be dragged down, because you’re making everyone else look bad, or you’re showing off. In the US, they’re the complete opposite. And yes, happy endings, over the pond they might shy away from realism—maybe a dose of reality now and again.

Marlon: In the UK, it’s almost like there are certain brackets: if you’re writing a comedy, then you can be hopeful, then you can be aspirational and have a good ending.

Daniel: That’s true.

Marlon: If you did that in a drama, you’re not being real, it’s “wishing-washy.” Whereas in the States, it feels like you can have a bit more of a mixture: be aspirational in both drama and comedy. In the UK, if you’re doing this then you’re doing it wrong. [laughs]

Sharon: [Laughs]

Marlon: And I don’t believe in that.

Daniel: I agree. I do think that’s changing a little bit here, just a little bit. In terms of Marlon’s and my experience of developing shows post-Run, there are efforts to move away from what’s been deemed as “ordeal TV.” Where watching something is a big ordeal and it’s really bleak, and so on. It feels like there’s been an effort to move away from that condition. For example, even though Run was very, very successful and we developed and wrote a second series for it, it ultimately got canceled just because of that reason alone: it was too bleak. Even though in that second series, we had more pockets of hope than we did in the first, it was already branded as, perhaps marketed as, and in terms of how it felt in people’s minds, it didn’t seem hopeful, but the complete opposite. So I think there is a concerted effort to move away from that. Which I think in one respect is good, but in another respect you need a balance. We’ll see, I guess.

Sharon: I am so sad there won’t be another series. And I do find it so interesting, even among my writer friends in London and LA, the sheer difference in situations and characters they choose to write about on either side of the pond. In your writing, do you think all stories and characters require a degree of hope and aspiration? A balance between rawness and hope?

Daniel: For us, yes.

Marlon: I think it’s important to give a character something they want to achieve. Something that’s a universal theme. We’ve got Ying—basically she just wants to be free. She wants to get
out of that life. I think it's always good to have something when you're starting with the characters: they're here at the moment and this is where they want to get to. And then, for drama, create hurdles that obstruct them from getting to that goal. I think that is aspirational in a way, because most people want to do something or put themselves in a better position than where they are right now.

Daniel: Yes, even if they've got to do bad things to do so. I think this is a very personal thing: we're attracted to writing characters who sometimes might do bad things, but for good reasons. Whilst on the face of it, it might not look aspirational, it is. Ultimately, it's the means to an end. The end is what it's all about. So, the short answer is yeah, we do need a balance, otherwise it's all just bleak. You can't just have darkness for darkness' sake, you can't just have bleakness for bleakness' sake. That's just depressing, and that's not what we've ever been about. Each of those characters in Run, like Marlon said, are trying to achieve something. They may not be going about it in the best way possible, but the fact that they're reaching for something is hopeful, in its own way. And the consequences of that can also be hopeful.

Sharon: In the US, and perhaps even internationally, there's been a real sense of audiences being open to engaging with, even craving, real and honest storytelling, no matter if it's raw or difficult viewing. What's been your experience of that—now that Run is available to stream on Hulu, for example?

Daniel: It seems like there is an appetite for that, and a small demand as well. We have had some interest, from the States in particular, from people wanting to adapt Run for that side of the pond. And there is that major tradition in the US of very formulaic shows. There's a place for them, and I enjoy some of them, but I guess if the balance tips too much, then—it might be what we're seeing now—some people might even be exhausted of that and looking for something else, especially people who watch online.

Marlon: I think people are tired of the episodic nature of some shows, aren't they? The constant raft of safe, detective shows, and the content on Netflix and Hulu gives you much more of a flavor of a longer-form narrative, and more of an investment in shows, rather than "my weekly dose of murder round the corner" type stuff.

Daniel: [Laughs] Yeah! I think there's a natural attraction towards, if you're watching something that's fictional, if you know on some level there's something real about it, something authentic about it, it makes it more attractive. You know, that's why something that's based on a true story might lead you in a bit more and make you think, "OK, it's still fiction—but it's like it happened in real people's lives." Or if you hear that the person who wrote or directed or starred in this actually went through this thing you're about to see, or is really from the place you're about to hear about, I think it ups interest. That's something that we're very good at over here. And I think yeah, the international audiences are definitely into that. The fact that you can watch stuff online, anywhere in the world, means that is going to get pushed more.
That authenticity, that feeling of realness, whilst at the same time keeping certain kinds of tropes that we’ve come to know and love. I think you need a balance.

**Sharon:** With the changes in digital television, what do you think we might see more of, going forward?

**Marlon:** I think more variety, you know?

**Daniel:** I think there definitely will be variety. TV is coming to the point where almost the world is your oyster. There’s been a slow migration of the big film writers coming to TV, too. The freedom that Hulu, Netflix, Amazon and so on give them. And these wide—massive—vistas they’ve got to flex their skills over 12 episodes. I just think there are kind of no limits, in a way. And you get Netflix continuing to plow money into new television drama, and it’s only going to get bigger. Anything is possible.

**Marlon:** And the way that we’re watching online, viewer habits are so much more accurate to measure. You can work out who wants what, where. Netflix is the classic example of that: *House of Cards* got commissioned because they just knew the audience for it, there was an appetite for that kind of show. So I think you’re going to get, especially on something like Netflix, a gritty kind of inner city show, or a social realist show, you’re going to get big budget kind of sci-fi, and horror, you can kind of see it starting already: there’s going to be something, essentially, for everyone. Maybe that’s a shorter answer: there’ll be something for everyone, and I think that’s a great thing. I think it will have possibly a negative impact on cinema, unfortunately, in that a lot of people will be getting their fix from on-demand television online, and that means we’re going to see more superhero movies because those are the only ones that are going to make money, and the more mid to low-tier movies sort of no longer exist. But one loss is another gain. And it will be great to flip on the television and think, “What am I in the mood for today? OK, I’m going to go for something a bit outlandish or something a bit more grounded,” and you’ll have loads of choices. More choice.

**Daniel:** And we’re really not far from that right now. You can watch *Game of Thrones*, you can watch *Breaking Bad*. There really is something for everyone. I think maybe what we’ll see more of, and what Marlon and I are really hoping for, is more diversity in those shows. And perhaps, as Marlon was saying before, highlighting certain communities or types of people, who you wouldn’t ordinarily see. And so as well as more genre, hopefully we’ll see more of the actual world we live in, and it won’t be so monochrome, any more. So, that’s a good thing, as well. That is slowly happening, and we believe it’ll just expand in time to come. It won’t happen overnight, but I think if you look at the next 10 years, we’ll just see more and more and more of it. It’ll be great for everyone, and particularly I guess for writers like us.

**Sharon:** And going back to *Run*, you’ve given a voice to characters who wouldn’t necessarily have had their story told—and with more variety and opportunity for writers, they’ll be able to tell other characters’ stories, no matter who they are.
Daniel: And thinking about characters from different communities—those very communities will be able to consume that entertainment through the online route. Whereas maybe in conventional TV, there are a lot of preconceptions because of the old advertising model, which is basically very constrained. Whereas with online, for example if the Chinese American community wanted a new show about themselves, you can commission a show about it.

Marlon: I think some traditional commissioners are getting wise about it already, that there are other audiences watching these shows, they’re not just catering to one type of audience. They’re catering for a global audience.

Sharon: Absolutely. And last, what would you say your initial experiences on Run have taught you, as you forge ahead on your own projects?

Daniel: Time waits for no writer! [Laughs]

Marlon and Sharon: [Laughter]

Daniel: You have to work fast and quick, and make sure it’s good. That’s one thing we’ve learned. We got a lot of traction from Run, which was great, we’ve learned that you have to really capitalize on that. For any writer, anywhere in the world, doing anything in any media, any small amount of attention you get that’s positive, try and make sure you’ve got the next project ready to go straight away, to capitalize on that. And try to develop the process by which you can create good work in short spaces of time, without compromising on quality. It sounds hard, but it’s achievable.

Marlon: For me it’s to have 100% belief and passion in your ideas, and the project that you’re working on. Because you’re creating the blueprint for the series or film that is about to be made. And essentially it’s a collaborative process and there’s going to be lots and lots of people involved. But the genesis is as a writer. If you are 100% passionate and believe in your ideas... at the beginning of Run we were very, very passionate about where it should be, how it should be set, and because we were so passionate and believed so much in our vision, everyone kind of got with it. And the finished product is probably as close to how we wanted it to be, as possible.

Daniel: Yeah!

Marlon: And I think it’s because of that belief.