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Brown has film voice down to a 'Science'

By Gregg Kilday

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Effie T. Brown has a knack for nurturing singular voices. As a producer, she has been involved in such films as the 2001 mother-daughter prison drama "Stranger Inside," the 2002 Latina coming-of-age story "Real Women Have Curves" and the 2004 Brooklyn-set ensemble drama "Everyday People."

On Aug. 10, Picturehouse launches her latest film, "Rocket Science," from writer-director Jeffrey Blitz, in exclusive engagements. On paper, the movie's premise sounds like the stuff of which after-school specials are made. High school student Hal Hefner (Reece Thompson) joins his school's debate team to overcome a stutter, compensate for a broken home life and capture the attention of winning debater Ginny Ryerson (Anna Kendrick). But the movie, which debuted in January at the Sundance Film Festival, is a lot quirkier than that. It actually plays more like a Wes Anderson film -- the dialogue is constantly surprising, the plot keeps taking unexpected turns, and the narration, cinematography and score are all refreshingly askew. A critical favorite -- the movie rates a 100% positive score at RottenTomatoes.com -- it earned Blitz the directing award at Sundance.

In a sense, the movie grew out of the 2003 Spirit Awards, where Brown and Blitz first got to know each other -- he was nominated for his documentary "Spellbound" and she was recognized with that year's Motorola Producer Award. But it was HBO Films exec Maud Nadler -- with whom Brown had previously worked -- who served as a creative matchmaker, suggesting that they work together.

At first, Blitz hoped to follow "Spellbound" with a fictional film about a spelling bee. But after a year of work that wasn't coming together, he mentioned that he had been a high school debater, and suddenly all involved seized upon that notion instead.

Although "Rocket Science" is Blitz's narrative film directorial debut, Brown says that betting on his abilities "didn't take much of a leap of faith because after seeing 'Spellbound' and spending time with Jeff, there was a certain tonality and

spirit you could see." With backing from HBO Films, the project shot in summer 2005 in the Baltimore area, with Brown and Blitz's producing partner Sean Welch overseeing.

It also is the first feature to fly the banner of Brown's Los Angeles-based Duly Noted Inc., the production company she founded in 2001. Having previously worked on a project-by-project basis, Brown has developed a slate of projects for Duly Noted, and with the aid of Endeavor Independent's Mark Ankner has been raising money from private investors for what she hopes will be a \$25 million film fund that will allow her to produce a half-dozen projects in the \$3 million-\$6 million range.

First up is director Caran Hartsfield's "Bury Me Standing," a comedic drama about how a random act of violence affects a family. Mos Def, Kerry Washington and Alfre Woodard are set to star when shooting begins in September. Then, in November, Brown plans to reteam with Def for the romantic comedy "Bobby Zero" -- Def will play a down-on-his-luck social satirist who goes to work at an advertising agency -- to be directed by Markus and Mason Canter, the writing and directing team known as the Flying Canter Brothers.

Schooled at stretching her production dollars -- she cut her teeth as a line producer -- Brown's pitch has been simple as she has gone about meeting investors. "I'm able to find excellent movies that win awards and engage people and have emotional resonance," she says. "I've never gone over budget, and my moves have never lost money."

It also doesn't hurt that her films speak with quite distinctive voices.

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