

**Two men find an unconscious African American man.
They have very different reactions.**



WHAT THEY SEEM

JOUSKA PRODUCTIONS presents WHAT THEY SEEM
directed, written and produced by John Becker
CHRISTIAN GIBBS VINCE EISENSON
MUHAMMAD OKEDEYI

Director of photography JAMIN HOYLE audio BRAD KLOTZ
1st assistant director BEKAH WACHENFELD music by
CARSON BECKER production stills SAMANTHA TRIONFO
alpaca wrangler LEVI HEBEISEN

Two men, one white and one black, have very different reactions when they find an unconscious African-American man in the woods of their upper middle class neighborhood.

KEY CONTACT

Writer/Producer/Director John Becker
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Writer/Director/Producer

John Becker has won the Individual Artist Award grant from the Maryland State Arts Council three times. His play Summit Meeting was awarded 1st place at a theatre festival held at the Kennedy Center. He co-directed and co-wrote a trailer for Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in NY and has had numerous plays performed. His musical, Everything I Do, was read at the Kennedy Center, workshopped through Artist's Bloc, and performed at the Atlas in DC. He co-wrote and co-produced the film Thirst. His play The Nature of things was a finalist at the off-Broadway Emerging Artists' Theatre.

Writer/Director Statement

We live in strange times. I don't think many people would disagree with that, but that's one of the few things anyone *can* agree on. Even the most basic questions have become tense and divisive. What constitutes a good human being? What is the truth? My goal was to create a film that would dive into these issues headfirst. Remembering a play idea I'd once jotted down, I began to research circumstances where unconscious, vulnerable people were found, and the investigations into how these people wound up in this situation. Let me tell you, it was a pretty discouraging slog that didn't exactly light a candle of hope for humanity.

However, that's where art can step in. I wanted What They Seem (the title was taken from a quote from Othello) to explore the conflict of such a situation—a conflict made even more powerful when racial issues are introduced.

My hope is that audiences will wonder how they would respond to the predicament in What They Seem. It might even make people reconsider the basic questions. What constitutes a good human being? What is the truth?



Location



Ah, the joy of filming in cold mud. It was hovering around the upper 20s during most of the shooting, and snowing sporadically. Being that it was snowing in some scenes and not in others, that can create somewhat of a continuity issue—not to mention planes buzzing overhead, barking dogs, and the fact that we were ankle deep in mud by the second day. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

What They Seem was filmed on the property of very tolerant friends in upper Montgomery County, Maryland, very near where the Blair Witch Project was filmed. They were also kind enough to not only allow us the services of Steve the Female Alpaca, but their son, Levi, who helped us wrangle Steve.

Fun fact: alpacas spit.

Steve, her friend Claudia (heretofore known as The Spitter), and various sheep and goats looked on as Steve performed like a true pro. During filming we also learned that alpacas are very hierarchical, so standing on their mound of dirt—which is their version of a dad's favorite

chair or perhaps a king's throne—is to be avoided at all times. Some lessons are learned the hard way.

Mo (Muhammad Okedeyi) probably got the worst of it where weather is concerned. Rather than being able to utilize his acting chops and mad improv skills, he spent much of the shoot lying very tolerantly in freezing mud. It turns out that no matter how many layers you wear, they will indeed absorb cold water right down to the underwear. Despite everything, Mo delivered an inspired performance.

Meet the Cast



Christian R. Gibbs has appeared in many productions with many theatre companies, including Studio theatre, WSC Avant Bard, Mosaic Theatre Company, and the Chesapeake Theatre Company. He's also appeared in several films, including *The Accident*.



Vince Eisenson is an NC-bred and DC-based actor, with many credits of the stage and screen varieties. He's been privileged to play many great Shakespearean roles, ranging from "Richard III" to "Third Messenger". Vince has acted in some commercials, TV shows and feature films. He's been in so many true-crime television episodes that *Washingtonian* magazine profiled him in a feature article about violent, campy cable shows. When not acting or teaching acting, Vince likes to juggle and spend time with his incredible family.



Muhammad "Mo" Okedeyi is a native of Maryland and has been acting in various projects throughout the metropolitan Washington DC area. He has done voice over work, commercials and television shows including 'The Wire.' Muhammad is also a screenplay writer and hopes to begin making films in the near future.

The Crew

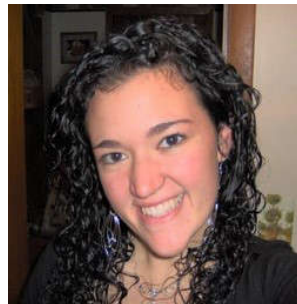


Jamin Hoyle (**Director of Photography**) is a freelance art and creative director in DC. He has a Master's Degree in Mass Communication from VCU Brandcenter — and nearly fifteen years experience in some of the DC area's best advertising agencies. A few of the brands he's worked on include New Balance, runDisney, Volkswagen, Amtrak, Colonial Williamsburg, the Islands of the Bahamas, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, the United Way, Woolly Mammoth Theatre

Company, NASCAR, and Netflix. Jamin's work has appeared in Communication Arts, Lürzer's Archive, the Art Director's Club Annual, Graphis, the W3 Awards, Print Magazine, and the New York Times.



Since completing the Videoworks program at the Sheffield Institute for the Recording Arts in 2012, Bradley Klotz (**Boom Operator/Sound Recordist**) has worked on the crew of a number of features, short films, music videos, and web series in the D.C.-Maryland-Virginia area, performing duties such as production assistant, grip, gaffer, and boom operator. Selected credits include Jouska Productions' first short film "Finding Sandy" and several feature films, including the indie Western "Day of the Gun" and SONset Friday Entertainment's faith-based thriller "Crisis Call".



Bekah Wachenfeld (**1st Assistant Director**) has stage managed numerous productions in the DC area, such as Signature Theatre, Roundhouse Theatre, Mosaic Theatre, as well as the Actors Theatre of Louisville and the Weston Playhouse Theatre Company in Vermont. She also served as 1st Assistant Director for Jouska Productions' short film Finding Sandy.



Samantha Trionfo (**Production Stills/Photographer**) has worked as an actress in a number of films, and has also been a make-up artist for magazine spreads, award-winning films, and many theatrical productions, including Glass Mind Theatre, Strand Theatre, EMP Collective, and the Baltimore Rock Opera Society.

Interview Questions

1. *What was your initial reaction to the theme of What They Seem?*

Muhammad "Mo" Okedeyi: My initial was this is a creative way of discussing a very serious issue going on in society.

Vince Eisenson: I thought WTS managed to be quite funny and subtly absurd upon a first read, and those are always huge pluses. That the script could manage that while tackling themes of profiling and racism made the project even more intriguing. I think a lot of writers forget that a good story and interesting characters are still crucial components of a "message movie".

Jamin Hoyle: My initial reaction to the theme was that it was a heavy, touchy subject — especially in the present political climate. I knew we needed to do a good job with a light touch. I really appreciated how the script uses humor to unpack a loaded situation.

2. *What was your favorite part of shooting the film?*

Christian R. Gibbs: Who else can say one of their co-stars was an Alpaca?

Vince Eisenson: The best part of shooting the film was getting to hang out in the woods for two days and try to troubleshoot all the problems inherent with an outdoor location. I know those should fall under the "difficult" category, but I always enjoy those complications. When you start slipping in the mud during a shot and have to keep going with the take, you discover moments that just won't appear in a rehearsal room or studio set. Mother Nature is always a great scene partner.

Muhammad "Mo" Okedeyi: My favorite part of shooting the film is witnessing the process of going from an idea to an actual work of art.

Jamin Hoyle: I loved working with the incredible actors. It was great seeing the thought that Christian, Vince, and Mo all put into their performances, unlocking ideas that might not even have surfaced in the hands of less talented artists.

Brad Klotz: My favorite part of shooting the film was simply the chance to work on a new and interesting project and the opportunity to capture sound in new and interesting locations (from the middle of the woods, to a barn full of sheep and alpacas, to the lonely train station with the soft jazz soundtrack).

3. *What was the most difficult aspect of shooting this film?*

Muhammad "Mo" Okedeyi: Ha! For me the most difficult part was the cold mud.

Vince Eisenson: While weather continuity caused some conundrums (mainly for the editor, I'm sure), shooting on two different days a week apart posed an unforeseen challenge: namely, I caught the flu during our week off and ended up filming the second half on quite a bit of over-the-counter medication. If you look closely, you can probably see my character get noticeably paler, woozier, and drop about 7 pounds over the course of the scene. But let's be honest - he's pretty white to begin with.

4. *Did the topical nature of the film cause you to approach the film from a different angle?*

Christian R. Gibbs: Yes, it did. I had to approach things with a bit more levity, and allow the humor to balance the other notes in the film.

Vince Eisenson: The topical nature of the film presented a natural backstory for all 3 of our characters. We didn't discuss this too much, or overtly allude to it, but I think it caused all of us to bring a palpable sense of tension to the scene. This movie is very much about the things we *don't* say to one another, and a lot of that is informed by the fact that this story is happening right now.

Jamin Hoyle: I tried to compose the shots in a way that reinforced the topical nature of the film, literally approaching the subject matter from a different angle. For instance, in some of the back and forth dialogue between Christian and Vince, I wanted Christian's character to feel boxed in by Vince, but wanted Vince to feel a more expansive freedom of movement — something akin to the way white privilege allows some people to operate comfortably (albeit more or less unwittingly) in other people's spaces.

5. *Did you do anything in particular to prepare for your role?*

Christian R. Gibbs: I pulled from experiences as a black man in America.

Vince Eisenson: Wardrobe considerations are key to preparing a role, and it was nice to have some leeway in making those decisions. Aside from that, our rehearsals and conversations among the actors, as well as some small, healthy doses of improvisation were key to preparing for this. Thankfully, when you get a good script like this one, a lot of the work is already done for the actors.

Muhammad "Mo" Okedeyi: I made sure I came to set wearing many layers and lots of towels to cover my car seats.



Jamin Hoyle, Christian R. Gibbs, Vince Eisenson, Muhammad Okedeyi, and John Becker share a laugh between takes. *Photo Credit—Samantha Trionfo*