

New movie tags phoniness of social media

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Kaily Smith Westbrook, left, plays a struggling actress who gets caught up in the deceptive world of social media in the aptly titled *People You May Know*. The movie premieres at the Denver Film Festival Nov. 4-7. Photo courtesy of Denver Film Society

Cherry Creek High School grad produces, stars in 'People You May Know'

BY PETER JONES

NEWS EDITOR

As a real film actress who plays a fictional actress caught up in the addictive world of social media run amok, Kaily Smith Westbrook has become decidedly careful with her own Facebook and Instagram accounts.

“There’s a part of me who understands that to be an actress, to do all the work I do, it’s important to have a reach to people. But I’m personally a very private person,” she said. “I think this film has highlighted for me my conflicts with social media.”

Those on Facebook will be familiar with the phrase “People You May Know”—and that is also the title of a new movie, co-starring Westbrook. But in context of the film’s adventures in 21st

century culture shock, the title may hit home in ways Mark Zuckerberg never intended.

“Unfortunately, I’d have to say this film is a slice of life,” said Westbrook, a Cherry Creek High School graduate. “Sherwin [Shilati, the director,] and I knew someone from college who had a really big following on social media for a while. And then all of a sudden, his whole following turned on him and were so abusive online that he basically ended up in a mental hospital.”

People You May Know will have its Colorado premiere Nov. 4-7 at the Denver Film Festival. Westbrook and Shilati will attend—and not just virtually.

The movie is set in a new world where studies show young people—sadly and ridiculously—decline social interaction to keep up with their social media, and where living in the moment with present company is less “liked” than a fictional, more interesting life on Facebook.

Among the *People You May Know* in the movie are Jed [Nick Thune], an online nobody with a penchant for photo manipulation, and Tasha [Halston Sage], a celebrity-obsessed web-based publicist who sees Jed as her ultimate challenge. In a modern nod to *Pygmalion*, Tasha ventures to turn Jed into a social-media phenomenon, albeit an entirely phony one.

When rising-star Jed reconnects—in person—with Facebook “friend” and high school crush Franky [played by Westbrook], he is caught between the fiction of his online identity and the more challenging reality of face-to-face interaction. At the same time, Frankie, a struggling actress in a failing marriage, is herself living vicariously on Facebook.

“When I read the treatment, I got the chills,” Westbrook said of the story. “Whether or not social media changes, it’s still a distraction and it keeps us from being present in our daily lives.”

Jed’s virtual fame is ultimately tested when a doctored photo of him and R&B star Usher goes viral. In a scene that may strain credibility for some, faux-star Jed meets real-star Usher in a nightclub, prompting the latter to feign familiarity with his photo-bomb cohort.

Even Usher, who plays himself in several scenes, gets caught up in the social-media fiction, evidently, perhaps in embarrassment over not actually recalling his famous “friend.”

“They have to validate and say, ‘Oh yeah, I remember you, of course,’” Westbrook said. “Usher was great and amazingly supportive.”

Eventually, the tensions in the non-virtual world destroy “friendships” in the all-important virtual one. When a woman tells Jed she has “unfriended” him, but stresses it was “nothing personal,” the irony is as stinging as the reality that such words have lost their meaning.

“Anna Margaret Hollyman, who played that part and said that line, said it so perfectly,” Westbrook said. “Her delivery of it is really incredible.”

Westbrook, who also served as a producer of *People You May Know*, says one of the biggest challenges of the film was keeping up with the ever-fluid world of social media and not becoming an anachronism before the movie even hits screens.

“We felt the longer we waited, the more social media was going to change and the more rewrites we were going to be doing,” she said. “We had a joke in the film about how only 13-year-old girls use Snapchat, and we had to change those lines [in post-production].”

Try watching 1998’s *You’ve Got Mail* for a relatively long-ago case in point.

As yet another sign of how things have changed in the internet age, after its Colorado premiere at the Denver Film Festival, *People You May Know* will be released Nov. 28—but not in theaters—the movie is going directly to iTunes and video-on-demand.

Westbrook says while social media has its dark side, the actress-producer stresses her new film is more of a cautionary Facebook status than that obnoxious sermon someone else posts.

“I think we wanted to bring awareness to it in a lighthearted way, without it being a public-service announcement,” she said.

***People You May Know* plays Nov. 4, 5 and 7 at United Artists at Denver Pavilions on the 16th Street Mall in Downtown Denver as part of the Denver Film Festival. Actress/producer Kaily Smith Westbrook and director Sherwin Shilati will appear in person. For tickets and more information, visit denverfilm.org.**