

Film on homelessness aims for runaway success

A short film raising funds for homelessness charities aims to tell the real story of people living on the streets



Rachel Williams
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Oliver Litondo, who stars in *The Truth about Stanley*. Photograph: Ben Millar Cole

In a dank side street off Covent Garden's piazza in London, an elderly man sways along the pavement, a battered carrier bag in one hand, a white stick in the other. A little boy with a cut lip creeps behind him. You suspect the tourists passing by might not notice them if it were not for the camera crew following the pair.

The Truth About Stanley, a short film being made to raise funds for the Big Issue and Anchor House, a hostel and life skills centre for homeless adults in east London, charts the friendship between two characters living rough on the capital's streets. Stanley, played by Kenyan star Oliver Litondo (recently seen in *The First Grader*), takes 10-year-old runaway Sam, played by Raif Clarke, under his wing, captivating and confusing him in turn with fantastical tall tales about his former life.

Director and co-writer Lucy Tcherniak's aim is to make a piece that gets through to viewers more profoundly than a usual charity appeal – crucial, she thinks, at a time when need in society is on the increase and there's a risk that people will become immune to calls for donations.

"There's so much charity in our faces, which is good, but all these ads do the same thing: it's all sad doe eyes at the camera," she says.

"I'm not saying it doesn't work, but my thing is storytelling. It's about making that connection with these characters and seeing that they're just like everybody else."

Talking to homeless people while researching the script, one thing that came through strongly was the increasing difficulty of finding somewhere to sleep where you won't be moved on, in central London at least, says Tcherniak's writing partner, Neil Westley.

Law firm Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, which supports homeless people through its corporate social responsibility programme, is financing the film, due to be premiered in February. The cast and crew are working for free; Pret A Manger is keeping them fed and watered.

Producer Tom Clark's fears of how a discussion between a disparate mix of business, charity and "us arty-farty film-makers" would turn out have proved to be unfounded – he worried someone might demand the film had a happy ending. "Everyone's always got on," he says.

Twelve-year-old Raif from Stoke-on-Trent, who is soon to make his big screen debut in *Theatre of Dreams*, a fictional story about Sir Matt Busby, has researched his role carefully. "People like my character, Sam, do just run away," he says.

You may not often see children as young as Sam on the capital's streets, because they are trying to avoid being scooped up by a system that is likely to try to send them home or into the care of children's services, explains Westley.

He says: "A huge number of children run away each year. Most of them really, really don't want to go home. Just because we don't know about them doesn't mean they're not out there."

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