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UA Professor's Film to Debut Across Multiple On-Demand Platforms

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By David Miller (david.c.miller@ua.edu)

When “Service to Man” is released across nearly every major digital platform this week, viewers may recognize some familiar faces, places and names in the end credits.



Seth Panitch, seen here during a stage performance of Hamlet, made his film director debut in “Service to Man.”

“Service to Man” is a drama that chronicles the bond between a pair of medical students – one white, one black – at Meharry Medical College, a small school in Tennessee, during the turbulence and violence of the civil rights movement in 1968.

Seth Panitch, professor acting and head of graduate and undergraduate acting programs at UA, earned his first director’s credit for the film, partnering behind the camera with Loyola University film professor Aaron Greer, who previously taught at UA.

The film won Grand Jury Prize for best picture at both the American Black Film Festival and International Black Film Festival. “Service to Man” has either won or been nominated for 15 other national and international awards over the last two years.

The film’s main cast members are mostly professionals, like Keith David, who has starred in box-office hits like “Armageddon” and “Platoon,” and in critics’ favorites like “Requiem for a Dream.” But Panitch, who also plays a doctor in the film, continued a long-running tradition of employing his students and other faculty to round out the off-camera crew. Panitch estimates that close to 40 UA students worked on the film.

“I call it ‘The Bridge Project,’” Panitch said. “We use pros, but we always find students to give a bridge to the profession. We’ve done plays and documentaries that also tie into this and incorporate UA students and faculty.”

“We are well aware that Tuscaloosa is not necessarily a nexus for theatre or film, so our intention with these projects is to bring the professional world here for our students.”

The Bridge Project began in 2006 with an off-Broadway production that gave students the chance to act, build sets and manage the stage. Panitch said roughly 85 students have participated in his projects.

Panitch’s experiences in teaching at UA, coupled with a unique inspiration to the script of “Service to Man” – the film is loosely based on his father’s experiences at the school – provided a personal motivation to make the film, which was shot entirely in the Tuscaloosa area, both at UA and at Stillman College.

“You can make money and make a difference, or you can just go make a buck. Assisting students in that transition [at UA] is what interested me in a story about a medical school at an incredible time when people were trying to decide what they wanted to be. I was developing as a professor here, and that aspect of the transitional nature of education in young men and women is what made it important to me.” *Seth Panitch*

Panitch began crafting the script for “Service to Man” in 2009 after helping direct a pair of documentary films, including “A Night at the Theatre,” which explores the relationship between actors and the audience. “A Night at the Theatre” was published by Insight Media,



the world's largest educational arts video company, which provided a springboard for "Service to Man," Panitch said.

Panitch, right, directs one of the actors during a scene in "Service to Man," which was shot in the Tuscaloosa area.

The film wrapped production in late 2015 and hit the film festival circuit in 2016, where it won eight "best picture" awards. The film circuit success helped Panitch partner with Freestyle Pictures, which will distribute the film throughout North America. "Service to Man" will be available across Dish Network, DirecTV, Amazon, iTunes, YouTube Movies and Google Play, among other services.

"You see a lot of support for science or projects that have results that are easily quantifiable," Panitch said, "but our administration, with these kinds of projects I've worked on, understand qualitative results and art, and that's a tremendous benefit to our faculty and our students."

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