

Professor creates film about past

BY MATTHEW WILSON (HTTP://WWW.CW.UA.EDU/STAFF/MATTHEW-WILSON) | Published 06/17/15 12:11am | Updated 06/17/15 12:12am
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Seth Panitch, a University of Alabama professor of theatre, examines race relations in his new film. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Perkinson

audience to fascinate in these characters, historical and otherwise, who were able to forge relationships across race during a time of great upheaval and animosity," Panitch said. "Also, the central battle of the film for Eli -- service to self or service to man -- is one we all fight daily, so I hope people can see their own struggles reflected in that journey."

Panitch partnered with Orpheus Casting, an established casting office in New York City. He said the production team was fortunate because the office gave them access to a rich pool of professional actors. Panitch looked for actors who embodied the spirit of Meharry in 1968.

While mostly filled with up-and-coming actors, the film also attracted the attention of established actors Lamman Rucker and Keith David, who Panitch met through their casting directors. Panitch said David was particularly interested in working on a film about Meharry and signed on quickly. Both actors worked for a fraction of their usual salaries in order to support the project.

Eric Marable Jr., a recent UA graduate, plays the character of Franklin Williams, who he describes as the film's comic relief. To prepare for the role, Marable said he researched the 1960s and tried to listen to as much music as he could from that time period. His favorite part of the experience was the amount of input he had in the backstory for his character.

"As long as I was responding honestly on film, [Panitch] was cool with what I was doing," Marable said. "He taught me everything I know, so he was cool with me taking chances and taking risks."

As one of Panitch's students throughout college, Marable said it was mind-blowing to have Panitch offer him his first job. Marable considers the film to bring the past few years of his life full circle.

"My first day on set I was so excited that I was being really weird," Marable said. "Have you ever been so excited that you're worried you're overwhelming other people with how excited you are? I was trying to hold back all the emotions. The first person who believed in my acting skills gave me my first job is unbelievable. When I was little, I used to say I was going to be a doctor, and my first film role was a doctor. We shot at Stillman College, which is where my parents met. I'm overwhelmed by the magnitude of it."

Panitch researched for the film by visiting Meharry itself, in Nashville, Tennessee, in order to capture the historical spirit of the place. The production team hired a number of local actors and film technicians to work on the film. Panitch said the final product will be able to compete with films with a similar budget, which is a testament to the local talent.

As production assistants, Alaina Boukedes, Elizabeth Thiel and Elizabeth Parkinson were on set 12 hours a day, six days a week, helping with equipment, setting up props or fixing breakfast. Boukedes, a senior majoring in journalism and theatre, said the production assistants help solve problems that arise on set.

Boukedes said the experience made her realize how much preparation and work goes on behind the camera and has made her a more humble actor. One of the most challenging parts of her job was the night shoots from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

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dream of directors Seth Panitch and Aaron Greer since Panitch started working on the script in 2008. Loosely based on the father's experiences, "Service to Man" follows the journey of the first white student, Eli Rosenberg, attending the historically black Meharry Medical College in the late 1960s.

Panitch, a University of Alabama professor of theatre, said he used the framework of his father's experiences to tell a story of universal communication and discovery. Having just wrapped principal photography, Panitch and his team will be busy editing the film, polishing scenes and incorporating music.

"Considering present circumstances, I'd love a modern audience to fascinate in these characters, historical and otherwise, who were able to forge relationships across race during a time of great upheaval and animosity," Panitch said. "Also, the central battle of the film for Eli -- service to self or service to man -- is one we all fight daily, so I hope people can see their own struggles reflected in that journey."

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“I think you can never really appreciate an art form fully until you experience it from all sides,” Thiel said. “The cast is full of incredibly talented people, and I was surprised by just how genuine and friendly they were on set. It takes every person in every department to make a movie.”

Perkinson, a senior majoring in theatre and English, said she was impressed by the number of the University’s current and former telecommunication and film students working on the film. Perkinson was in Panitch’s Shakespeare class and asked him if she could help with production of the film over the summer.

Most of the film was filmed around Tuscaloosa, Moundville and Irondale. Both Thiel and Perkinson said one of the challenges of production was filming with the number of trains passing through. Perkinson said they had to halt production to prevent the sound of the train’s whistle showing up on film.

Panitch said he found directing a film to be a vastly different process than planning a theatre production. One of the major differences for him was having to craft a story out of sequence rather than working chronologically like he did with theatre.

“The logistical challenges of bringing in a number of New York actors and scheduling them throughout the four week shoot was particularly dizzying,” he said. “You must always be aware of where each scene lies in the trajectory of the action, as they are fashioned out of sequence.”

Like his character, Franklin, Marable said he wants people to learn how to work together and trust in the soul of a person rather than their background.

“I really want people to get that same sense of inspiration and love,” he said. “At the heart, it’s about people having love. Everyone is a part of each other. We are all God’s children. We’re all going through pain. We’re all going through changes together.”

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