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UA Professor's Work Wins 'Best Film' at Black Film Festival

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UA theatre professor Seth Panitch (center), poses with “Service to Man” actor Morgan Auld (left) and the film’s co-director Aaron Greer.

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — University of Alabama theatre professor Seth Panitch’s first full, feature-length film, “[Service to Man](#),” was awarded the grand jury prize for best film at the 20th [American Black Film Festival](#) Sunday.

“We feel terrific about it,” Panitch said. “We were the only university-sponsored and supported film in the entire competition. So to have them honor us with best picture was a real shock and incredibly gratifying, especially considering the caliber of films that were running this year. They were terrific film. We were very happy just to be run among them.”

The film was one of 25 selected to be showcased at the festival, which is the largest of its kind in the country. The festival is dedicated to bringing awareness of entertainment content made by and about people of African descent to a worldwide audience, according to its website.

The festival was held in Miami June 15-19.

“Service to Man” was the only university-produced film in the festival. It was nominated for best screenplay, best direction and best film. It premiered alongside films such as comedian Kevin Hart’s “Central Intelligence.”

Panitch, who is head of the Master of Fine Arts Acting Program in the department of theatre and dance, said the film is loosely based on his father’s experiences as one of the first white students at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn., in 1968.

He said the film depicts white and black medical students communicating and working together during a time of great duress in the country, including the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and its aftermath.

“With all the difficulties people of different races dealt with back then, they somehow found a way to communicate that has been, perhaps, forgotten in many circles today,” he said.

Panitch started working on the film as part of a larger initiative he began in 2006 called the Bridge Project. The Bridge Project helps UA theatre students bridge the gap between being a theatre student and a working theatre professional. It places them in professional productions alongside established actors in reputable theaters.

Working with professional actors such as Keith David, who was in “Platoon,” and Lamman Rucker, who was in “Why Did I Get Married?,” about 30 UA students played a part in “Service in Man” through the Bridge Project.

It took Panitch five years to research and write the script for the movie – he completed it in 2013. From there, he partnered with Aaron Greer, a former associate professor of telecommunications and film at UA, and started pre-production with a camera crew culled together from markets across the country.

Andy Fitch, an associate professor of scene design at UA, created all the sets in the movie, and Tom Wolfe, a professor in UA's department music, composed all of the music. Dominic Yeager, assistant professor of theatre, served as business manager for the massive undertaking.

The movie was filmed in West Alabama and on UA's and Shelton State Community College's campuses from May to early June.

Now that the festival is over, Panitch hopes the film will generate enough interest to be shown at other film festivals and possibly be released, either digitally or nationally.

"There were representatives from other festivals who were there scouting us and said they were interested in using our film in their festivals," he said.

UA's theatre and dance department, part of the College of Arts and Sciences, became a unified department in 1979. For the past 34 years, the department has produced student and faculty directed, performed and designed work. The department cultivates the next generation of performing arts professionals through comprehensive undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Visit theatre.ua.edu.

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