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Father's life inspired movie "Service to Man"

Film festival circuit lauds UA professor's work



This scene from "Service to Man" takes place in the middle of a riot, when Eli, played by Morgan Auld, accidentally strikes a girl on a bicycle with his car and returns to help her at risk of his own life.

Submitted photo

By [Mark Hughes Cobb](#)

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When Seth Panitch was growing up, he noticed two kinds of doctors: The first, like his father, would make house calls any time of day or night and work on Sundays.

Facts

Sidewalk Film Festival

From Tusk reports

This weekend's 18th annual Sidewalk Film Festival, celebrating new independent cinema, will again take place in and around downtown Birmingham's Alabama Theatre, an area known as its historic Theatre District, which includes not only the 2,200-seat movie palace, but the Carver Theatre, the restored vaudeville Lyric Theatre, and a number of smaller venues opened for the weekend.

Films range widely, from shorts and animated features to documentaries and music videos to biographies and feature-length narratives. Sidewalk also connects filmmakers with parties, breakfasts, galas and field trips.

Many of the showings feature post-film Q&As with the artists.

VIP passes, which help gain early entry to films, and with other perks, are still on sale for \$275. Regular weekend passes are \$80, and day passes are available for \$30 each. For schedules and other information, see www.sidewalkfest.com. Magazine-thick programs will outline the offerings on site.

"And the others wouldn't do any of that stuff," said Panitch, a professor in the University of Alabama's Department of Theatre and Dance. He asked his dad what made the difference. The answer was one word: Meharry. That's Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee, founded in 1876 as the first medical school in the South for African-Americans. Panitch's father was the first white man to attend, back in the late '60s.

"Here's this guy from Brooklyn, a Russian-Jewish area of Brooklyn, who had no experience of black people at all," he said. At Meharry, his father not only dealt with culture clash, but learned medicine as an art, as service to others, not for his own enrichment. That became the genesis of the film "Service to Man," shot largely in and around Tuscaloosa, and showing this Sunday at 10 a.m. as part of the "Black Lens" spotlight of the Sidewalk Film Festival. There'll also be a free showing of "Service to Man" at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 8 in the Bama Theatre.

"I used (his father's experience) as a springboard to tell the story of how people from different races and

different backgrounds can find common ground under great duress," said Panitch, who wrote the screenplay. "My father character starts out thinking 'I want the car, I want the money,' but he finds out that's not why you go to medical school."

The film took off with the help of former UA film professor Aaron Greer, when the two were working in Cuba. Panitch has extensive theatrical experience, writing, directing and acting, and wrote a number of screenplays while in Los Angeles -- a few of them optioned, though not yet produced -- but hadn't directed a full-length film, or written on-set. From years of patchwork, he began assembling the screenplay in 2012. Shooting began last summer.

"It took us a year for pre-production," he said. "We had to hire our crew, some local, some from all over, and go to New York to sign major SAG (Screen Actors' Guild) actors."

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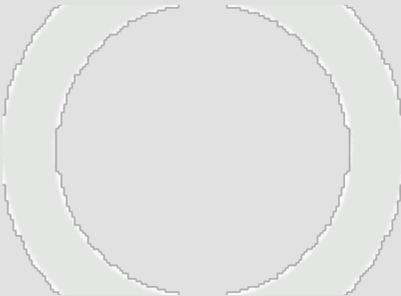
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