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SUMMIT life

Music and the mind in New Orleans

Breckenridge Film Festival closing night film 'Una Vida,' featuring actress Aunjanue Ellis, explores Alzheimer's disease

By Jessica Smith
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"You have to read this."

That was the phrase repeated over and over that eventually got one book turned into an independent movie, and then a festival favorite. "Una Vida: A fable of music and the mind" is a book written by Louisiana-based neuroscientist Nicolas Bazan. The plot follows another neuroscientist, Dr. Alvaro Cruz, as he loses his mother to Alzheimer's, a disease he studies but cannot cure. When wandering around New Orleans, Cruz comes across a street performing jazz singer named Una Vida, who is also suffering from Alzheimer's. The film follows Cruz's growing relationship with Una Vida and the people in her life, from her adopted daughter to her elderly caretaker.

The winner of numerous film festival awards, the film version of "Una Vida" was chosen as the Closing Night feature of the Breckenridge Film Festival. It features actress Aunjanue Ellis, who is known for her role in various television shows — including "The Mentalist," "NCIS: Los Angeles," "True Blood" — and films such as "The Help," "Ray" and "Men of Honor."

FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN

Writer, director and producer Richie Adams first met Bazan while shooting a commercial for Louisiana State University's health sciences center, where Bazan works. At the end of the project, Bazan pulled Adams aside to tell him about the novel he had recently written.

"He tells me the story and I'm like, 'This sounds amazing,' because it had music, it was set against the backdrop of New Orleans," Adams said. Though he didn't know much about Alzheimer's disease at the time, the plot drew him in, imaging Dr. Cruz's character "like a fish out of water, walking around the streets of New Orleans," and that "there's an unpredicted kinship that develops there, and that was very engaging for me."

Adams jumped at the chance to do the project. His next step was to call in friend and fellow producer Brent Caballero. Reading the book on Adams' recommendation, Caballero said he was drawn in not only by the Alzheimer's storyline but what it meant in the setting of New Orleans.

"It can only happen in New Orleans, in my eyes," he said. "It's a magical city where you will find in the French Quarter that class, racial lines, begin to disappear, and that's what I love about that city. ... I felt like this is something that can literally happen in New Orleans, so I was on board."

Next came gathering together cast and crew. Ellis heard of the project and read the book, but when Adams first offered her the job, she turned him down, not sure she was right for the part. Adams extended the offer again, asking her to think about it, and eventually she agreed.

Ellis called her on-set experiences and relationships "glorious," adding that she particularly loved the active message and mission of the film.

"I feel like when people leave (the theater), they're somehow enriched, or they grow from the experience," she said.



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

Aunjanue Ellis as Una Vida, left, sings alongside Bill Cobbs as Stompleg in the film 'Una Vida,' which explores Alzheimer's disease in the setting of New Orleans.

IF YOU GO

What: Breckenridge Film Festival Closing Night

When: 6 p.m. (doors open at 5:30 p.m.), Sunday, Sept. 21

Where: Riverwalk Center, 150 W. Adams Ave., Breckenridge

Cost: \$20 ticket covers Closing Night awards, film screening and party

More information: Visit www.breckfilmfest.com

Watching her and the other cast members work was an amazing experience, according to Adams.

"To write something and then see Aunjanue, who is out of this world in the film, and the other team members breathe life into it, with such conviction, I'm like, 'ah, those are real characters now, that's it,' and to see that happen, it's an out-of-this-world experience, and I love it," he said. During filming, he'd often get so caught up in a scene that "I'd forget to say cut."

PERSONAL CONNECTION

Many of those working on the film had personal connections with Alzheimer's and similar diseases. Caballero's grandmother had Alzheimer's, the meaning of which eventually weighed on him as he grew old enough to understand it. In his own effort to understand, Adams read countless books and attended lectures on the subject, taking in viewpoints from every angle.

Ellis also has an emotional connection to the subject. Her mother suffers from a neurological disease similar to Parkinson's.

"It was more than inspiration," she said, of her mother's effect on her role in the film. "I would literally mimic her."

During production of "Una Vida," Ellis would spend her mornings with her mother in a rehab facility in Mississippi, and later in the day drive to work in New Orleans, where "I would sometimes have the same conversation that I had with her," she said. "(I'd) essentially act what I experienced hours before that."

Ellis describes the experience as "intense but pleasurable at the same time," mixing her work, her art, with her personal life.

"It was definitely a release," she said, "and I felt like in my little humble way, I was paying tribute to her every day I came to work."

COMING TOGETHER

The relationships between each of the characters carry significant meaning, which adds the beauty of the film, said Adams and Caballero.

The title, "Una Vida," which is the name of the main character and means "one life" in Spanish, holds layered meanings.

For Caballero, it represents the characters not only coming together, but reaching out to each other to help and heal, thereby bonding their lives together.

"This movie is about watching someone else helping someone else next to you, literally taking their life and creating one life between three, four, five different people in society that didn't know each other before, that don't share the same economic class, the same color — none of it matters in this movie," he said. "That's what's important to us."

That's another aspect that is emphasized and made possible by the setting, both

Caballero and Adams agreed.

"There's just something magical about New Orleans, in watching how there is that blur of racial lines, when it comes to music and love for people and that sort of thing," said Adams, "and I wanted other people outside of the South to see that, to see that beauty, because that's the South I know, that's the Louisiana that I know."

INDEPENDENT FILMMAKING

"Una Vida" is an example of a truly independent film, made on the streets of New Orleans and far away from blockbuster studio offices.

Though that may have made things more difficult money-wise, both producers feel it was worth it to maintain the original tone and message of the film.

"We were so adamant about keeping the integrity of the characters that were written," Caballero said. "We were afraid if we weren't the decision makers in making this movie, that it would be stripped from us and it would be commercialized and that would have killed us, it would have killed the movie. I think this movie is so much more special because we kept the integrity in tact, and I think everyone from the actors and the crew recognized that."

Independent film festivals, like the one in Breckenridge, are therefore integral in helping boost awareness of the film and get it in front of appreciative audiences.

"I just want to say thank you to the festival for including us in this," Ellis said. "I'm very grateful."

Adams added that he was "extremely honored. We know that's a prestigious distinction to be the closing night film."