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MOVIE NEWS & REVIEWS

Haitian-American 'Project Greenlight' winners to speak at mini film festival

BY RANDY GRICE
Special to the Miami Herald

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For most filmmakers, it is a fantasy to have their projects come to life and be enjoyed by fans. Two Haitian filmmakers in Miami have turned that dream into reality.

“The Haitian culture has given me a vibrant set of tools to use as an artist,” said Joshua Jean-Baptiste, who with fellow filmmaker Edson Jean speaks Saturday at the Miami Film Festival’s GEMS 2017 mini festival about their upcoming project “VAKABON,” which was made after they won the \$25,000 “Project Greenlight” contest.

“Being born and raised in America by a Haitian mother came with a lot of necessary friction,” Jean-Baptiste said. “My mother’s teachings often influence my writing whenever I am thinking about a character’s values. She has a strict moral compass which I have used as a point of reference to see if I am pushing the envelope too much or too little. The storytelling prowess of my culture has also come into play when creating. Haitians tend to be very animated when sharing a tale.”

As filmmakers, they are relishing their well-deserved success. Jean said that winning “Project Greenlight” in early 2016 has been a dream come true.

“It has been wonderful, but I do not see it solely as my work,” he said. “For me, the inspiration and creation of art comes from something greater than the self and we, artists, are the channels that it flows through. I am humbled to have been open and receptive at the right time.”

Both of the artists graduated from New World School of The Arts. Last year, Jean-Baptiste wrote and directed a short play, “Plenty of Shrimp,” which premiered at Micro Theater Miami.

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In 2012, Jean wrote, directed and starred in “The Adventures of Edson Jean,” which was a finalist of the HBO Short Film Competition at the American Black Film Festival. He has also appeared in “Ballers,” “War Dogs” and Academy Award-winning “Moonlight.” Last year, he was also featured in “Never Not Been From Miami,” which premiered at the Miami Film Festival.

“I think connection is more vital than ever and film festivals give filmmakers the rare opportunity to interact directly with their audiences,” said Jaie Laplante, executive director and programming director of Miami Dade College’s Miami Film Festival & Tower Theater Miami. “Budding or not, all good artists are always learning, and the chance to sense the nuances of their audience’s engagement with their work can potentially alter or shift their approach to their work.”

Laplante will appear 1 p.m. Saturday with Jean and Jean-Baptiste at their GEMS 2017 conversation, “Don’t Take Yes For An Answer.”

While Jean-Baptiste has seen his share of growing success, he still has words of wisdom for those walking in his footsteps. “Continue to create,” is the best advice he has for aspiring filmmakers.

“Always have sticks in the fire. If nothing bites then hone your craft, build your repertoire and keep on being active in any capacity. Eventually, you would have worn enough hats in your career to become a high-value target that people will want to work with.”

IF YOU GO

The Miami Film Festival’s GEMS 2017 mini festival runs Thursday through Sunday at Miami Dade College’s Tower Theater, 1508 SW Eighth St. in Little Havana.

Don’t Take Yes For An Answer: Edson Jean, Joshua Jean-Baptiste and “VAKABON” in conversation with festival director Jaie Laplante takes place 1 p.m. Saturday. Tickets are \$9 each, available at <http://bit.ly/2g5vPJR>.

For complete information about GEMS 2017, visit <https://gems2017.miamifilmfestival.com>.

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