

Area writer/director Maya Washington scores a hit with 'White Space'

Written by Alaina L. Lewis



Loud and clear are the first thoughts that come to mind after my eight-minute escape into writer/director Maya Washington's phenomenal film piece, "White Space."

"White Space" is a story about a young man who is footsteps away from accepting his greatness, when he pushes his fear aside and takes the stage at a spoken word poetry set in Los Angeles, where he marvels the hearing audience with his vocally inaudible piece. As a deaf performance poet, American Sign Language replaces his words. This single act of bravery proves to everyone in the room who is captivated by this display, that the heart travels faster than the speed of sound. The film stars Ryan Lane as The Poet, and Washington as his girlfriend.

Washington said her greatest hope was simply that someone would watch the film. Her hope has been undoubtedly met since its completion date. "White Space" has screened in over 23 film festivals worldwide and has garnered it a slew of awards including the 2012 Best Short Film Award at the Hollywood Black Film Festival held earlier this year. Her work is both celebrated and rare which speaks to her innovative ability as an activist and her creative niche as a visual artist.

"I initially came up with the idea for 'White Space,' because I had this dream and this vision of a deaf performance poet walking through the streets of Los Angeles going to perform at this venue. And surprise, at the end, instead of using spoken word, he's using American Sign Language to convey his poetry," explained Washington.

The film has also inspired Washington to create a community outreach curriculum that is inclusive of a poetry collection book written by deaf and hearing poets, as well as a global initiative to celebrate sign language poetry as an art form. Washington has taken the film, and hearing impaired artists, to a myriad of schools and workshops across the world to demonstrate the importance of this poetic art form.

Although she travels worldwide in the name of film and education, Washington got her start right here in the Twin Cities as an actress at the Youth Performance Company, when she was just a teen. She credits the local arts scene for being a huge part of her foundation, which eventually lead this talented woman to obtain a Master's in Fine Arts from Hamline University, and a

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bachelor's in theatre from the University of Southern California.

“Having the opportunity to grow up in Minnesota where we have exposure to the arts, and actually have a place like Youth Performance Company where you can develop as an artist; you can bloom, you can grow, you can find yourself taking on any number of roles on stage or behind the scenes, through writing and doing a lot of really cool things,” said Washington. “For youth, I think it’s really important to figure out where your natural gifts and talents lie. If you can figure out where your passion is, that’s half the battle. Then from there, when times get tough and doors close or things don’t necessarily go the way you want them to, that passion is what keeps you going and helps carry you through.”

“White Space” recently played at the Indie Boots Film Festival on May 9, in Chicago and the Toronto International Deaf Film and Arts Festival on May 11. To follow this film, Washington’s career, or to donate to her White Space Poetry Project, visit her website, www.whitespacepoetry.blogspot.com