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Passion guides students to Spotlight

UCLA Graduate Film Award winners find direction, follow calling to work on films



COURTESY OF UCLA FILM/TELEVISION

Graduate film student Chris Eska's "Doki Doki" explores Japanese culture's tendency to hide feelings.

By [Johanna Davy](#)

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To survive in the film industry is no easy task.

For every Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino, there are thousands of would-be directors and screenwriters struggling just to make ends meet. For a few UCLA graduate students, however, the future looks a little bit brighter.

Every year the film school hosts the Spotlight Awards, a weeklong festival

honoring outstanding graduate student films in three areas: directing, screenwriting and producing.

This year's winners come from diverse backgrounds and have all pursued different paths to get where they are today. But they all share one characteristic: passion.

"This is not about money. This is about passion. I have to tell stories," said J.T. O'Neal, writer of "Black Diamond."

O'Neal is a Harvard-trained physician and Air Force veteran who practiced medicine for several years, including stints lecturing at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine. Although he wrote his first screenplay at Harvard University, he never thought of screenwriting as a career until his mother passed away eight years ago and he decided to reassess his priorities.

"If I were to die tomorrow, what would I regret not having done?" he asked himself. "And it was screenwriting."

O'Neal acknowledges that his film, about a jazz singer who falls in love with a Negro League baseball player, will be a tough sell to the studios because it's a period piece with an all black cast. Still, he's glad to be honored by UCLA.

"(The award is) nice validation that someone thinks I should be writing," he said.

Monella Kaplan, producer of "The Visionary," also came to film in a roundabout way. After studying communications and political science in her homeland of Germany, she worked for German television before coming to Los Angeles.

"Journalism is just not challenging enough," she said. "Producing bridges the creative with the business."

She won this award last year for her film "Birth of the Vampire" and is flattered to be receiving recognition for "The Visionary," an epic love story she compares to "Shakespeare in Love." Kaplan has nothing but praise for her UCLA experience.

"I admire the teachers, they really inspired me," she said.

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Unlike O'Neal and Kaplan, directing winner Chris Eska went straight to film school after spending a year travelling after college.

As an undergraduate at Rice University, he was planning to major in pre-med or sociology when he took a film class for an easy A. But when he found himself waking up at 5 a.m. to work on his films, he knew he wanted to go to film school.

"(UCLA has) the best mix between Hollywood and the art film," he said.

Having spent extensive time in Japan, Eska was intrigued by a culture where emotions are concealed, unlike in the United States.

His film, "Doki Doki," is the story of two strangers who have waited for the same train together every morning for years but have never spoken.

"(Shooting in Japan) was the best experience I've ever had," Eska said.

He's glad to be getting recognition for his film, which in addition to the Spotlight Award played at the Los Angeles Film Festival.

"(Making a film), you lose objectivity, and then suddenly you put it out there and everyone likes it. ... It's incredible," he said.

The other winners of the Spotlight Awards can undoubtedly look forward to many more incredible things in their futures.

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