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## Father's life inspired movie "Service to Man"

### Film festival circuit lauds UA professor's work

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.

"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.



*Submitted photo*

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.

"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."

Among stars of "Service to Man" are Keith David, a journeyman actor whose films include "Platoon," "Crash," "Bird," "Armageddon," "Requiem for a Dream" and "There's Something About Mary." He's held recurring roles on TV series including "Community," "Hercules," "ER" and "Spawn," and narrated the 2013 miniseries "The Bible." He also played Keith the Handyman on "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," and is currently Bishop James Greenleaf on the TV series "Greenleaf," airing on the Oprah Winfrey Network. The connection with David helped bring in Lamman Rucker, who's also on "Greenleaf," and has had feature roles in Tyler Perry movies.

Morgan Auld, who was in "God's Pocket," Phillip Seymour Hoffman's last completed film, stars as Eli, and Christopher Livingston from the series "Unforgettable" plays his friend Michael. Other hired pros in the film include Sydney Morton, Nathan James, Tim Ross and Michael Pantozzi. Also featured are Tuscaloosa-area actors such as George Thagard and Willie Williams, with former UA students including Eric Marable Jr., Chris Bellinger and Jay Jurden. Shooting began last summer, and due to the shoestring budget, was wrapped in four weeks, whereas a historical production of similar size should have had 12 weeks, Panitch said. Including cast and crew, about 60 UA students from theater and film worked on the project.

Locations include Bryce Hospital offices, Stillman College classrooms and exteriors, a cafe in Moundville, at various places on the UA campus, and a few spots in Birmingham. Greer and Panitch co-directed, with the former working largely on the technical side, while Panitch rehearsed the actors.

"Even if you didn't have something to do with this film, you know somebody who had something to do with this film," Panitch said.

Shooting wrapped in June 2015, but post-production, including editing and the addition of a musical score by UA professor Tom Wolfe, meant the film wasn't finished until January. "Service to Man" evolved from Panitch's Bridge Project, helping raise the profile of UA students in the professional world. Under the same structure, he took current and former students to New York this summer for the debut of his musical comedy "Here I Sit, Brokenhearted: A Bathroom Odyssey." The Bridge Project is largely funded by UA, with about 10 percent coming from independent sources.

The film's currently heating up on the festival circuit, helped by a Best Film win at June's American Black Film Festival in Miami. It's also been accepted, so far, to the Heartland Film Festival, the International Black Film Festival, Bronzenes Film Festival, North Carolina Black Film Festival, Tallgrass Film Festival, and Sidewalk. For most of those, it's nominated for best film -- at the American Black Film Festival, "Service to Man" was also nominated for best screenplay, and best director -- in competition with major productions out of Los Angeles and elsewhere.

"We've made it past the first round at Sundance," Robert Redford's king of festivals, but Panitch admits that one's a long shot.

"Service to Man" might get picked up by a distributor, and thus enjoy mainstream cinema life, or a run on Cinemax or HBO. In his Hollywood stint, Panitch wrote for Joel Zwick, a multi-decade director and producer with credits for miles, including films such as "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," and TV series such as "Mork & Mindy," "Laverne and Shirley," "Full House," "Bosom Buddies," "Webster," "Girl Meets

World" and dozens more. Zwick liked what he saw, having grown up in the tumultuous '60s himself, and came on board "Service to Man" as a consulting producer.

Although the story is fictionalized to heighten drama, Meharry's president, James Hildreth, told the writer it "captured the spirit" of the school.

"That was so important to me, for such an important place," Panitch said. "We wanted to celebrate a place that doesn't ask for celebration."

Meharry's motto is "Worship of God Through Service to Mankind." It's named for Samuel Meharry, a Scots-Irish immigrant salt trader traveling rough roads in Kentucky, back in the 1820s, when his wagon slid off the road. A family of freedmen, former slaves, helped recover his wagon from the swamp, and gave him food and shelter. He reportedly told the family, whose names are unknown: "I have no money, but when I can I shall do something for your race." It took five decades, but he stayed true to his word. With four of his brothers, Meharry donated \$15,000 to help establish the school in 1875.

"So it was started by a communication of blacks and whites, under duress," Panitch said. "As educators, part of what we try to do is differ between service to people and service to self. I teach my acting classes: 'It's not about the light shining on you; you're in a service industry.'"

"That's the way you become a better man or woman: by serving people."

"Service to Man" will air at 10 a.m. Sunday in the Carver Theatre. The free Bama Theatre showing will be at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 8.

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