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Film program director aims to open doors

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Eric Engman/News-Miner

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Maya Salganek rests the lighting on the set of a film project in the UAF Salisbury Theatre Friday morning, November 4, 2016. Salganek the Spotlight for the week.

FAIRBANKS — The walls of Maya Salganek’s office are covered with posters from movies filmed in Alaska.

There’s posters for the 2014 romance “Mining for Ruby,” the 2012 drama “alaskaLand,” the 2013 short film “Blue Bead” and the 2008 dark comedy “Chronic Town,” among many others.

But beyond being showcase of Alaska-grown movies, they're a showcase of the kind of movies that Salganek hopes to help others create.

Salganek is the director of the University of Alaska Fairbanks' film program, a program that she helped create and shape over more than a decade with the university, as well as a film producer and director.

The bachelor film degree is the only of its kind in Alaska, and under Salganek's oversight has become an incubator of sorts that has helped give a growing and diverse group of students a unique opportunity to tell their stories.

"It's been a very hard road for so many people to get their perspective seen and told, and I want to be somebody who opens doors and doesn't close them for people based on their background or their history or the precedent," she said. "That's one thing Hollywood can't do. They're so worried about the precedent of what sells, what's marketable and what's fashionable that a lot of the stories that we can produce here they would never want to touch."

She points out the poster of the "alaskaLand," which she produced with UAF. The film was written and directed by Chinonye Chukwu and tells the story of an Alaska-raised Nigerian living in Fairbanks as he struggles with the cultural divide.

"It's about being Nigerian in Fairbanks, what a cool perspective," she said. "That's totally a story I would never imagine writing, much less imagine relaying, but being able to produce that and show that experience was something I really valued."

Salganek came to Alaska after marrying her husband, who's Tlingit, and soon realized that she was often an outsider looking in when it came to the stories and voices in Alaska.

"I think when I moved to Alaska and knew I was an outsider and really felt I was in a place that I didn't know the stories. It was a conscious decision to move from a director role to a producer role so that I was supporting people's stories that I felt were authentic," she said. "I'm really happy in playing that producer role in enabling and promoting other people's stories to come to the forefront."

But her place in Alaska's film scene wasn't immediate, and that's because before her arrival there wasn't much of a film scene to speak, but she saw the opportunity.

“When I got up to Fairbanks there wasn’t that much going on,” she said. “The short version of it was if there was anywhere in Fairbanks I belonged as a position and career path it was at the university.”

When she first started working at the university in the early 2000s she found the university had the makings of a film program spread throughout different colleges, but it was all more academic than practical teachings. She said she pushed to wrangle those pieces together into a cohesive program by the late 2000s.

The program finally got the support of the University of Alaska Board of Regents after the creation of the Alaska film tax credit program, a state incentive program aimed at attracting film crews to the 49th state. Specifically, the program was designed to help create an Alaska-trained workforce for movies.

“It’s been a long road,” she said. “It’s been a really long road.”

With productions coming to Alaska because of the film tax credit program, students found roles on sets that eventually helped them transition into mainstream movie production.

But it didn’t last.

The film tax credit program was repealed in 2015 amid flagging state revenue and increased skepticism from legislators that the program wasn’t working as intended. There was too much reality television with little benefit for the state, they argued.

The elimination of the tax credit program cut the legs out of the developing industry, Salganek said. The high-profile movie “Hunter Killer” was set to begin filming in Whittier but pulled out of the state after the program was eliminated.

Without the tax credit program, Salganek was faced with the problem of how to find her students the valuable hands-on experience. She said without credits on an actual production, it can be impossible for young film students to find a place in the film industry.

“I want students to be able to compete in the industry and make a living long-term,” she said.

Salganek and UAF launched an internal production company called FRAME Film Production Services, which works on educational and corporate film projects, and continued to seek smaller Alaska-focused projects for her students.

Salganek and her students recently completed work on “Feels Good,” a film written and directed by Andrew Okpeaha MacLean of Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow), and the film will appear at the imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival in Toronto this year.

The film program also recently merged with the theater program. Students will focus on one or the other, but their talents and facilities like the costume shop and set shop are shared between the two.

“I feel like we’re at a place right now where it’s just a world of difference than from where we were four or five years ago,” she said. “It’s just growing and growing all the time. We’ve got more and more interesting students that are coming up every day.”