

Featured Film: 'Buffalo'

Where the Buffalo roam On the set of student writer-director Julian Alexander's historic mini-drama

By David Salcido
Las Cruces Bulletin

It's a dazzling Southwestern day in March. High in the impossibly blue sky arching over a desert awash in the colors of spring, a hawk spins lazily on an updraft.

One almost expects Clint Eastwood to ride in off the range, seeking vengeance or, at the very least, a place to hole up for the night. It's the kind of New Mexico day that was made for the movies.

On a ranch 10 miles north of Las Cruces, the cast and crew of the civil war drama "Buffalo" are taking advantage of that fact. It's been a grueling week for the producers, which has taken them all across the state, from the northern reaches of Cubero, situated between Grants and Albuquerque, down here to the borderlands, where the movie officially got its start.

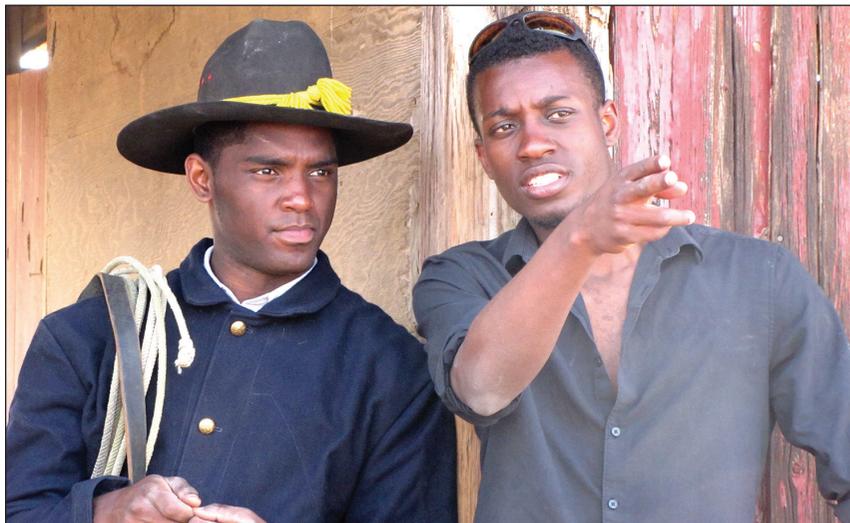
It's been the kind of production that just might make a veteran like Eastwood very proud.

Written and directed by Julian Alexander, a senior at the prestigious Creative Media Institute at New Mexico State University, the short film, "Buffalo," will serve as his senior thesis. That fact alone may come as a surprise, considering the production values that have gone into the project. No stranger to filmmaking, with at least half a dozen of his own short films under his belt and several more that he either produced or acted in for friends, the young director knew going in that this experience was going to be special.

"Really, it came down to wanting to tell this story," he said. "No matter how corny it sounds, I really wanted to make something important. I guess I could have made my senior project a story that I could have shot in my apartment, or down Main Street in Las Cruces, but I had an opportunity to really milk my resources and shoot something kind of ambitious."

The story he chose to tell is that of the Buffalo Soldier, a nickname given by Native Americans to the cavalry of all-black soldiers after the Civil War and a little known chapter in the history of the African American experience in the Old West. Not an easy task, certainly, but a story rich with possibilities and one Alexander spent hours researching. It wasn't until he stumbled upon the Friends of Fort Selden, a Civil War reenactment group, that everything really came together.

"It's incredible the amount of knowledge these guys have about history," Alexander said. "Using them as a resource forced my authenticity. I think we really captured the essence of the time and it's



Las Cruces Bulletin photo by David Salcido

Actor Craig Tate is given instructions by director Julian Alexander on a ranch north of Las Cruces before shooting begins on one of the final scenes for Alexander's short student film "Buffalo." The post-Civil War drama tells the tale of a Buffalo Soldier and was shot throughout New Mexico.

been interesting having to do all that research and making it all come to life."

Also helping Alexander on this journey was CMI professor and advisor for the project, Ilana Lapid. A world traveler with a Master of Fine Arts from University of Southern California and a film currently in development that was a finalist at the 2014 Sundance Screenwriting Lab, she teaches several film studies and production classes at CMI.

"Julian has been one of my students since 2011," she said. "He wrote his script in my class and I asked him to do a series of rewrites. His story was great, but he really needed to work on character development and he did. The script, I think, is so compelling. That's really the reason he was able to get so many people on board, supporting him and willing to go the extra mile for him. That's ultimately what led to his casting of Craig Tate, which is really remarkable."

Tate, who was cast in the pivotal role of Sgt. Harrison Young – a former slave who joined the Union army soon after his emancipation at age 15 – is a young up-and-comer whose recent work includes such prestigious films as Best Picture Academy Award-winner "12 Years A Slave" and Lee Daniel's "The Butler." His involvement brings an air of respectability to the production and further emphasizes the filmmakers' desire to make something out of the ordinary.

It helps that Alexander also understands the importance of surrounding himself with passionate, qualified people. Most of the crew members on this shoot are old friends who have worked with him many times before. In fact, it's his company, Something Fresh Productions

– co-owned by the film's Producer Keagan Karnes, Executive Producer Jon Foley and Director of Photography Andrew Griego – that really sets this film apart from other senior thesis projects.

"We're like a family," he said. "We've been through so much together and learned a lot of things the hard way, but the experience has been invaluable. I trust these guys completely. That takes away a lot of the doubt and fear. It doesn't feel like a school project at all. It's the real deal."

"It's a big step, there's no doubt, but I think it's come together amazingly well," said Karnes, who has essentially been Alexander's right hand man throughout the shoot, setting up everything from locations, horses and an Apache translator, to an actual herd of buffalo, including a rare white buffalo integral to the story. "The way that this looks, I feel like this is the start of something big for us. It's like Julian said, we're never going to take a step back."

Ambitious though this film may be – one of the largest ever attempted by students of Creative Media Institute – it has been a labor of love for the Something Fresh crew. The result will be a short feature that everybody involved believes will set the bar for everything that comes after.

"The story plays exactly how I imagined it," Alexander said. "Every cast member played their characters exactly the way I wrote them. It was really a fun, enlightening experience and everybody seemed to have a great time. I really think we've made something special. I think we have a very good chance to get it out there and play with the big boys."

Are you listening, Mr. Eastwood?



DOWNTOWN
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happening

UPCOMING EVENTS

FRI MAY 2	1030 A.M.
Rhythm Roundup – Music & Movement ages 2-5	Branigan Library
FRI MAY 2	3 P.M.
Dinosaurs A to Z	LC Museum of Nature & Science
FRI MAY 2	7 A.M.
AJ Croce in Concert	Rio Grande Theatre
SAT MAY 3	10 A.M.
Fetch!	LC Museum of Nature & Science
SAT MAY 3	10 A.M.
Family Science Saturday	LC Museum of Nature & Science
SAT MAY 3	1030 A.M.
Storytellers of Las Cruces	COAS Bookstore
SAT MAY 3	1 P.M.
Animal Encounters	LC Museum of Nature & Science
SUN MAY 4	2 P.M.
BOOK SIGNING: with Tim McKimmie	Branigan Library
SUN MAY 4	3 P.M.
Mesilla Valley Chorale: Celebrate Music	Rio Grande Theatre
TUE MAY 6	1030 A.M.
Read to Me – Storytime ages 3 & Up	Branigan Library
TUE MAY 6	4 P.M.
Teen Game Night	Branigan Library
WED+THU MAY 7+8	10 A.M.
Toddler Time! Stories for kids 1-3	Branigan Library
WED MAY 6	11 A.M.
Mother Goose Time	Branigan Library
THU MAY 8	130 P.M.
Guide to Online Grant Sources	Branigan Library



ONGOING EVENTS:

- Downtown Art RAMBLE - 1st Friday of the Month 5-7pm
- Las Cruces Farmers & Crafts Market - Wed. and Sat. Morn.

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