

Students Explore 'The Hatrix'

By Prudence Peiffer

"I want to know if this is the only world, filled with hatred and violence," the protagonist Bayjik asks in the short film "The Hatrix," which had its world premiere at Southampton High School on August 6 as part of the First Annual Black Media Foundation Youth Film Festival.

Answering his own question, Bayjik continues, "I know there is more than this."

The deep schism between real life and "reality" as portrayed through the media is a critical concern of the Black Media Foundation (BMF), a nonprofit organization based in Shirley and founded by the husband-and-wife team of Clarence Sheppard and Natalie Byfield. Finding a positive way for young students to explore storytelling and the different faces of the media has brought the couple to many New York schools and national film festivals (including Sundance) as part of their "Media in Education" program.

This summer, they led 11 students from Social Thinking and Reasoning (STAR) and the Southampton School District's Summer Enrichment Program through a six-week workshop that culminated in the creation of public service announcements and "The Hatrix," loosely based on the 1999 blockbuster movie "The Matrix." The workshop was sponsored in part by Southampton Public Schools, the Southampton COM-PASS Coalition, and the Downstate Prevention Resource Center.

The screening on August 6 also included highlights from BMF's collaborations at other schools, and films



Movie poster for "The Hatrix," a short film that premiered as part of the First Annual Black Media Foundation Youth Film Festival in Southampton. TOM ISLER

produced through a separate program the foundation spearheads, "Do-It-Yourself Productions," which encourages aspiring filmmakers to work on individual projects. The workshop students—including Nora Clarke, Ingrid Cardona, Dave Fein, Nicholas Gettling, Dylan Ingram, Connor Kirk (credited as Funk Master Freckles, the music engineer of "The Hatrix") Calyne Martel, Soraya Matos, Darren Nelson, Jasmine Seymore and Jesse Wellen—ranged in age from 11 to 13. The STAR counselors who assisted in the project also have a direct interest in media arts, including Fawn Gettling, 17, Andrew Smith, 17, and Ginev Benton, 22.

Ms. Gettling, whose younger brother Nicholas starred as Bayjik in "The Hatrix," choreographed the film's martial arts scenes. She also made a documentary this past school year, "Beautiful," through "Do-It-Yourself Productions," about a high school girl battling an eating disorder, which was shown on Wednesday night. Mr. Benton starred in and helped produce "The Hatrix" under the purview of his own film editing, design and graphic company, "Black Eagle Productions," which also screened a film, "The Crossroads," on Wednesday.

Black Media Foundation began nine years ago in 1993 when Mr. Sheppard and Ms. Byfield left their jobs as journalists for the New York Daily News to address the forgotten stories—particularly the under-representation of minorities—in mainstream media. Since then they have worked like artists-in-residence, visiting schools for blocks of time to do projects involving newspaper and film.

The couple have devoted their lives to what they view as an essential but overlooked aspect of today's pedagogy. "We live in a media-based society ... Everything is media ... For the kids to not understand the complexity of the wide array of technology and intellectual skills used to construct media is a mistake," Ms. Byfield said in an interview last Friday. Too often, she explained, messages are not being deconstructed, but simply received and processed unchallenged by young people. Black Media Foundation aims to have students "critically apply their own thinking and then learn to create media themselves."

Two imperatives, driven by the season, steer the workshop: it has to be fun and active. The kids, Mr. Smith said, "do all of it," from brainstorming concepts to making storyboards, writing, directing, acting in and editing the films. The results are impressive and powerful.

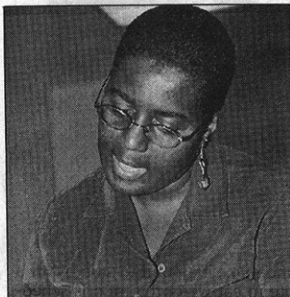
"The Hatrix" is a mix of special effects and tight editing that captures the energy of the original blockbuster while delivering a different message about the need to eliminate hatred and violence from today's world, especially within the media. (The film's message is admittedly slightly undermined by the complex combat choreography throughout.)

The public service announcements are all no longer than a minute and address a variety of topics that mattered to the students who made them, from using Ecstasy and marijuana to bullying and racism.

These are short jolts of reality with individual camera styles and forceful one-liners. Some are funny, others scary, but each has a potent message underlined in text, such as, "Remember: violence begets violence," "The first time you use may be your last" or "Racism is not hereditary ... it's learned."

Viewing the films produced through this summer workshop lends credibility to the hopeful pronouncement at the conclusion of "The Hatrix": "The future is ours. We've become creative and independent thinkers."

More information on the many programs of Black Media Foundation can be found at the foundation's website, www.bmf.net.



Natalie Byfield

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