

Judson Festival Showcases Faith-Based Films

By Cheryl Chojnacki
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David Nixon will be one of the keynote speakers at Judson University's 7th annual Imago Film Festival.

When Korisa Madayag filmed a music video with her cousins and a couple of friends for a class assignment, she couldn't imagine the project was good enough to land in a film festival, so she almost didn't enter.

But when Judson University hosts its seventh annual Imago Film Festival March 28 to April 1 on the Elgin campus, Madayag's four-minute film will be among 18 that were chosen to be screened and compete for honors.

"One of Us" is the only student project selected for inclusion. Other original films, all shorts of 30 minutes or less, were entered from the United States, Mexico, Italy, Spain, Great Britain and the Middle East, making this an international festival.

Keynote speakers are David Nixon, producer of the nationally released films "Facing the Giants," "Fireproof" and "Letters to God," and Jeffrey Overstreet, former film editor for Christianity

Today and author of the book “Through a Screen Darkly.”

Besides the short films, audiences also can settle in to watch the full-length Hollywood feature “Where the Wild Things Are.” Chicago film critic J. Robert Parks will lead a discussion about the movie, based on the popular children’s book by Maurice Sendak.

Showcasing faith-based independent films with artistic merit, as well as cultural relevance, Imago Film Festival is distinctive of Judson University, said Dr. Terrence Wandtke, festival director. There are probably 15 to 20 faith-based film festivals in the country, he said, but Imago is the only one in the Midwest.

Although Judson is a Christian university, Wandtke hesitates to use the same description for the festival entries.

“Sometimes when people hear ‘Christian films’ they think, ‘Oh, those are films that are about Jesus,’” he said. “(This is) a showcase for films that explore the connection between faith and film. We want to encourage the faith experience in all of its complexity.”

A faith-based film, he said, looks at the ethical precepts of Christianity and may have nothing to do with biblical narratives. “It asks meaningful life questions about what it means to believe in something beyond this world,” Wandtke said.

Strong language, sensuality and violence might show up, he said, but “nothing is gratuitous. Everything in the film must serve the point of the film. It can’t be there for its own sake.”

Although Imago is a community event, the original intent of the festival was to expose Judson media students to people who are shaping the film industry.

“The student films are great,” Wandtke said. “I’m always incredibly proud of them. But they’re put together by

undergraduate students who have limited resources. They use the films they see at the film festival as the standard to which they aspire.”

Another benefit of the event is exposure to people who are talking about films in an intelligent way, Wandtke said. That’s why he invited Parks, a film critic from Paste magazine and other publications, to lead a discussion.

“We want to encourage people to think about films in ways that are specifically driven by faith concerns,” Wandtke said. He’s excited not only about this year’s speakers, he said, but also about the films that made the cut as festival entries.

Selected from among the student submissions, Madayag’s film is a music video for “One of Us,” originally sung by Joan Osborne, but also covered by the “Glee” cast — the version Madayag chose to use.

A senior media studies major from Lake Zurich, she first envisioned the video as a story about being watched. “I had a very superficial approach to it: I’m just going to create a situation, someone’s watching them, and then call it a day,” she said. “The whole religious reflection was added later.”

When two of Madayag’s grandparents died within three weeks of each other, her thoughts took a spiritual turn, she said, and she found herself thinking about how God is always watching. The scenarios filmed for “One of Us” are about choices people make on a daily basis.

“Everything that you’re doing, it’s your decision, it’s your choices,” Madayag said. “Whether it’s good or bad, what God wants you to do is learn from them and grow from the bad decisions that you’ve made.”

Original films shown at the festival will be judged by a panel of film professors and other professionals in the field. Best of Show will take home a \$1,000 prize, and smaller prizes will be presented for the best films in two categories — under 15 minutes in length, and over 15 minutes — and an Audience Choice Award.

An awards ceremony will be held on the final night with food, live music, a keynote speech by Overstreet and screenings of the winning films.

Festival activities will be held at Marjorie Hall Thulin Performance Hall on the Judson campus, 1151 N. State St., Elgin. Events Monday through Thursday, March 28-31, begin at 7 p.m., and the April 1 awards ceremony begins at 6 p.m.

Tickets are \$5 for March 28-31 and \$8 for April 1; a full-event pass is \$12. For Judson students and faculty, tickets are \$2 for March 28-31 and \$4 for the April 1 ceremony; a full-event pass is \$6.

For more information and a schedule of events, visit www.imagofilmfestival.com.