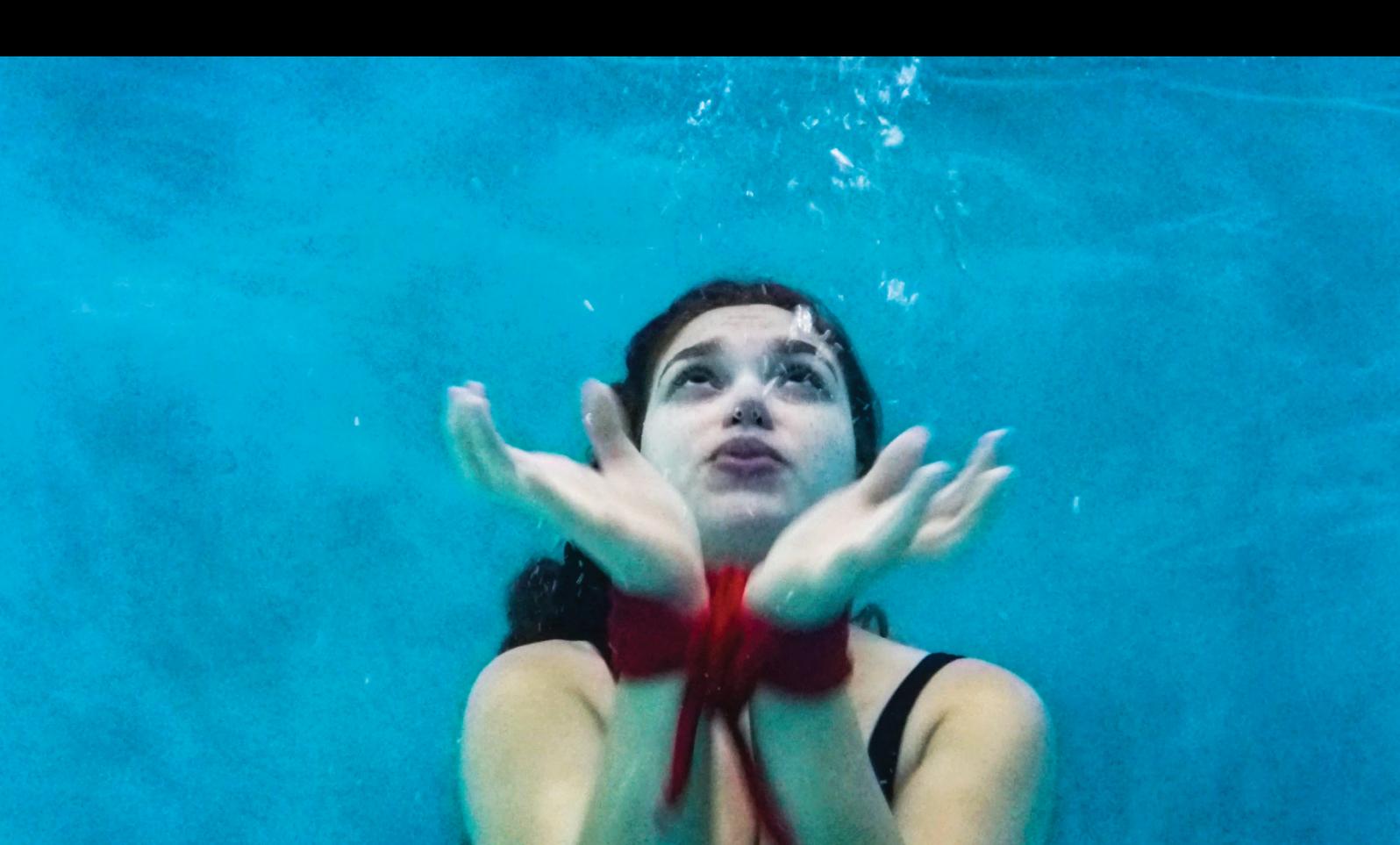


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COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
University of Alaska Fairbanks



BODIES OF WATER



“It changes life, having known death.”

—Maya Salganek

By Kael Knight, CLA Writer

The scene fades slowly from black. We are underwater, the lights and sounds are distorted and unreal. There are glimpses of someone — a woman — struggling against a rope tied around her wrists. Her cries are muffled by the water, her words passing in tiny bursts of air, rushing by to reach the surface. She is pleading for help, shaking her wrists, trying desperately to escape. Then she stops.

Everything is quiet, everything is still, and the woman looks directly into the camera, air bubbles streaming from her lips and nose. A voice comes from nowhere, a stressed, tired voice on the verge of breaking, emotion welling up in every word. “Each time I touch the water...I can’t forget. I want to. Oh, how I want to. But I can’t. I shouldn’t.”

In fall 2016, a dedicated and diverse film crew began production on one of the most personal projects ever developed by the Department of Theatre and Film, principle film production on the screenplay “Bodies of Water,” written by Adrina Knutson.

In 2012, Knutson passed away in a car accident in Tanzania, where she had been working on a film project with UAF Professor Len Kamerling. Knutson received a posthumous degree in film from UAF in 2013, the year she would have graduated.

Knutson wrote “Bodies of Water” while enrolled in Kamerling’s class. A few years later Maya Salganek decided to produce it. Salganek is an assistant professor of film/video arts and the

director of “Bodies of Water.” She knew Knutson very well and had been looking for a screenplay of hers to produce. This script stood out to everyone who read it. Jill Shipman, the assistant director, described it as “inspirational and heartbreaking.”

The screenplay tells a story of two sisters. The oldest sister, Leona, fails to save her younger sister, Willow, from drowning. The remainder of the story follows Leona through a particularly difficult path to find escape from her overwhelming guilt, all the while exploring themes of grief, sorrow, cruelty and isolation. Salganek described it as “a story of feeling estranged from something bigger than us.”

The characters and symbolism contained within the script drive people to deeply examine the psychological sides of the message Knutson’s work conveys. According to Salganek, members of the cast and crew still disagree on what certain aspects of the script mean. Screen plays this good do not come around often, and Salganek knew it. “There was almost no question in my mind,” she said. “We needed to film it.”

Filming would be a challenge. The script was ambitious, much more than what Salganek believed a beginning film crew could

RACK FOCUSING RACK FOCUSING IS THE ACT OF FOCUSING CLOSELY ON SOMETHING IN THE FRAME TO THE POINT WHERE EVERYTHING ELSE IS OBSCURED, THEN ADJUSTING THE FOCUS SO THAT ANOTHER OBJECT IN THE FRAME, PREVIOUSLY OBSCURED, BECOMES THE FOCUS OF THE SHOT. RACK FOCUSING IS OFTEN USED IN MOVIES TO REVEAL A HIDDEN DYNAMIC OR TO SHIFT THE AUDIENCE’S ATTENTION TO ONE PARTICULAR SUBJECT. “BODIES OF WATER” CONTAINS SEVERAL SHOTS USING RACK FOCUSING. ▼ THE MOVIE STILL BELOW DISPLAY RACK FOCUSING: ONE FRAME FOCUSES ON ONE ACTOR, THE NEXT FRAME EXPANDS FOCUS TO INCLUDE BOTH ACTORS.



◀ Top: Ariana Polanco, playing the character Leona, filming a water tank escape scene. Bottom: A dream sequence from the film, starring Polanco as Leona.



handle. As part of the new course structure put into effect this year, Film Production I and Film Production II were combined on set, the idea being the students with more experience would be given pivotal roles. Beginners, including high school students taking the course for dual credit, would have supporting roles. Salganek also hired a number of professionals to mentor her students. A few alums who knew Knutson volunteered to help mentor as well.

The crew had to alter the script to fit the available resources. For instance, there was a scene in the original screenplay that took place in a subway station. Fairbanks is a little short on subway stations, so the scene was moved to a bus stop. Everyone wanted to stay as close to the original script and message of the film as possible while reworking these details. In order to achieve this, Deanna Knutson, Adrina Knutson's youngest sister, was brought on as assistant script supervisor.

For Deanna Knutson, the script resonated on an entirely different level, which is why she was so perfect for the position. She knew her sister better than anyone on set, and some of the earlier scenes of the script were heavily based on memories from her and her sister's childhood.

Ariana Polanco, a UAF theatre student, was cast in the lead role, Leona. Polanco didn't expect to be selected as the lead, saying she was hoping for a role as an extra. She was as taken with the script as anyone. "The story is quite powerful," she said in a cast interview. "I really commend...the writer, Adrina, for writing a character like that."

There was no questioning the cast and crew's dedication to the project. They often went to extremes in order to bring the film to life. There were at least three divers outfitted with scuba gear and action cameras to film an underwater scene at a local lake. Another lake scene was shot using an aerial drone. The cast spent hours outside, wet and cold, in order to get the shots they needed. Many shots used a number of local child actors. Polanco had

▲ Professional acrobats on the circus stage in the later half of the film.

◀ "Mister," a pivotal character in the later half of the film, silhouetted on stage.

to film many scenes underwater in which her wrists and ankles were tied together and she had to appear to be drowning. Later in production, a snake wrangler and a few acrobats were hired. Fairbanks locals will recognize Golden Heart Plaza downtown by the river and Cornerstone Plaza here on campus, among other familiar locations used in the film.

Even though most students on set did not know Adrina Knutson, everyone could tell what this film meant. “The actors felt the words,” Salganek said. “They knew from day one that this project was important.”

“I feel very fortunate, and have a lot of gratitude to be able to work on this project in particular,” Shipman said. “I was very moved by the situation in general. I take it very seriously, what we’re doing. It’s a responsibility to tell this story the best we can, and to execute the film in Adrina’s honor.” Shipman never met Adrina Knutson.

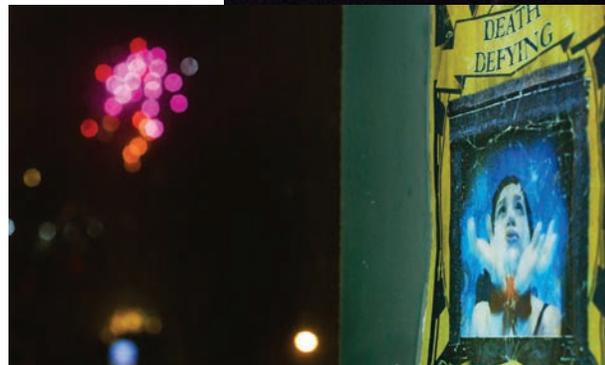
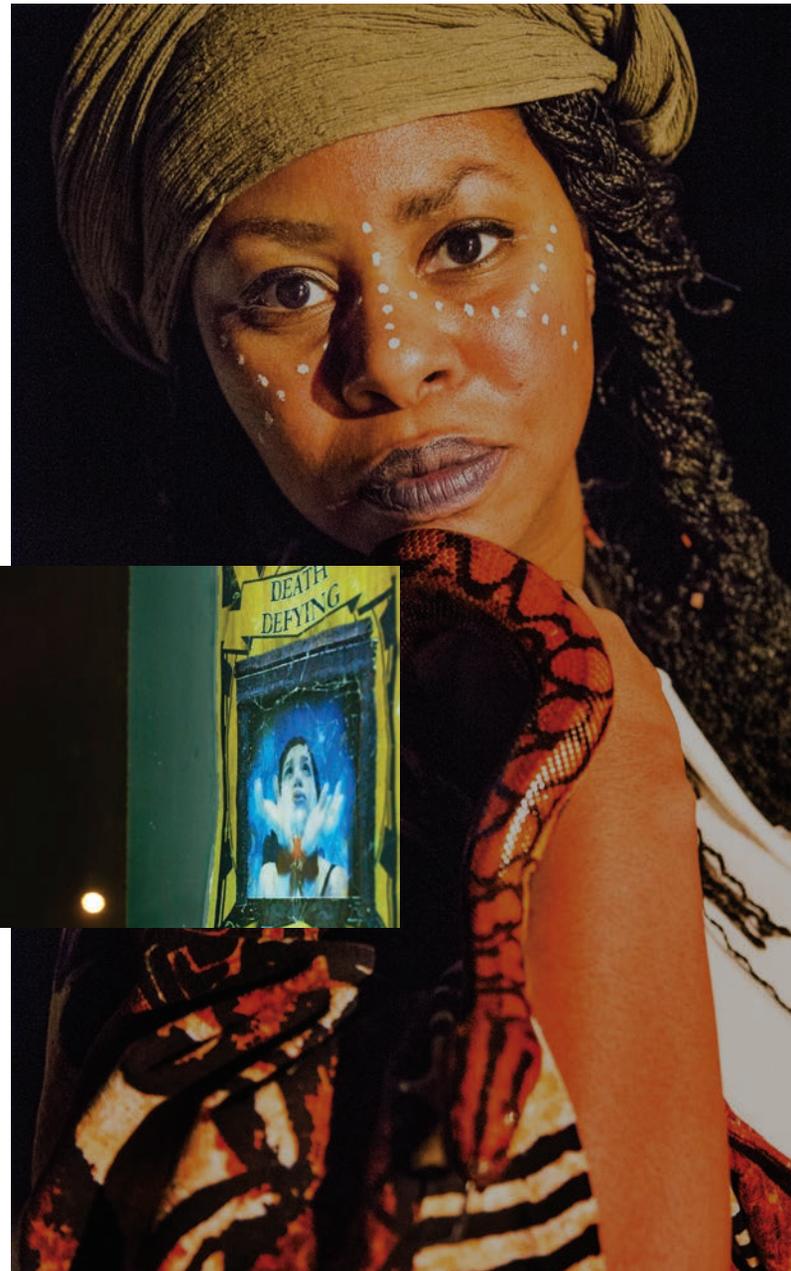
Deanna Knutson expressed similar feelings in an email recently. “I cannot even begin to explain the love my family feels from the passion and dedication put into making this film,” she wrote. “This project was a way for me to be a part of something Adrina left behind and gave me the ability to help transform it into something beautiful and something she would be proud of. I am very excited and really anticipating the final product. I am so honored to be the sister of someone who touched so many lives and continues to do so long after her death. She was my role model growing up and continues to inspire me each and every day.”

Filming wrapped up in early December 2016. The film still needs much post-production work, but Salganek and her editing team plan to have the final edition of “Bodies of Water” ready to show by fall 2017. ■

Follow the UAF Department of Theatre and Film on Facebook for more news about local productions.

To learn more about UAF’s film and performing arts degree program and roles you can play in upcoming productions, visit www.uaf.edu/theatrefilm/.

ACTION CAMERAS ACTION CAMERAS ARE A SPECIALIZED CLASS OF CAMERA, KNOWN FOR BEING ABLE TO WITHSTAND EXTREME TEMPERATURE AND FULL WATER SUBMERSION. THEY ARE USED TO CAPTURE SHOTS FROM PLACES NORMAL CAMERAS WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO GO, SUCH AS THE UNDERCARRIAGE OF A CAR, A STUNT MAN’S HEAD OR A DRONE. THE CAMERA CREW OF “BODIES OF WATER” USED SEVERAL ACTION CAMERAS, INCLUDING A GOPRO HERO4 BLACK AND A DJI INSPIRE 1 AERIAL DRONE.



▲ A promotional poster advertising Leona’s “Death Defying” act, while fireworks light in the background.

▶ A practicing snake charmer brought in by the film crew to lend authenticity to the circus scenes.