FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Feb. 27, 2015
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Legacy with a Capital ‘L’
Fraternity, historic neighborhood collide, collaborate in new South Arts documentary

“Legacy” is an important word in any culture. In the South, “legacies” evoke deep and historic attachments and alliances. The documentary Old South tells the story of two Southern communities steeped in history – one black and one white – that collide while striving to keep their respective legacies relevant in a changing America.

Mary B. Martin School of the Arts at ETSU presents Old South with filmmaker Danielle Beverly as part of South Arts’ Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers on Monday, March 16, at 7 p.m. in ETSU’s Martha Street Culp Auditorium. Following a screening of the film, producer and director Beverly will engage the audience in a discussion about the film and her work as a filmmaker. A reception with the filmmaker will follow. Film and reception are free and open to the public.

When Kappa Alpha – the most elite of the white fraternities at the University of Georgia – buys and demolishes houses on one block in an historic African-American neighborhood to build a fraternity house, the black community becomes agitated. To further complicate the situation, Kappa Alpha’s “spiritual hero is Robert E. Lee, they hold an antebellum parade every year and they are historically known to fly the Confederate flag,” Beverly says.

The arrival of the KAs galvanizes Hope, a 30-year-old fifth generation black funeral home director, to organize her neighbors to fight for historical designation of the 150-year-old neighborhood with the goal of slowing, if not thwarting, the path of gentrification of the community.

When one conflict is resolved, a new struggle emerges through the arrival of an outsider: a white woman from Colorado. She starts a community vegetable garden, and it begins to become a location where the two groups can find some common ground.

“What was initially a very contentious conflict and hurt-building collision between legacies, results, I’m happy to say, in is a bit of walking in each other’s shoes,” says Beverly, who moved to Athens and filmed there for more than three years. “The film has a bit of a hopeful ending, some understanding of one another. Hope is a change agent. And there is also a young man in a fraternity that becomes a change agent, as well.”
The screening is also a part of the “Think. Live. Respect.” series, sponsored by ETSU’s Division of Student Affairs. The series is intended to spark thought and conversation all across campus this spring.

“I think it’s important what we’re really talking about significant issues in this effort at ETSU this spring,” says Anita DeAngelis, director of Mary B. Martin School of the Arts. “The ‘Think. Live. Respect.’ Series is looking at how to build bridges, how do we learn to live together, and appreciate one another rather than seeing so many differences, and I think that’s important. There again, that’s why I think this film is significant and one that should be very important in our whole community and not just a particular group in the community.”

The common ground found in Old South makes this story special, Beverly says. “While [the film is] a very quiet look at the racial dynamics that are happening on one block, it is emblematic of the racial dynamics that happen in many communities,” says the filmmaker who hails from the Midwest, “and there is some kind of hope and reconciliation by the end. That’s what I would say makes it so special …

“Race is at the forefront of every conversation this year, and thank God! … We are looking at the dynamics of race and the injustices of race in a really concentrated way right now, and this film falls right into that because it really looks at the unspoken, the misunderstanding, between groups of people played out in everyday interaction and when we understand those interactions and those feelings at a base level, we somewhat start to understand the greater discussion that is going on.

“Old South is a vehicle for discussion. It is a vehicle for recognition. And hopefully it is a vehicle for taking one step toward another person.”

Beverly makes documentaries, often filming, recording sound, producing and directing as a solo filmmaker in the field, as she did with Old South.

In 2014 she was awarded a BAVC National MediaMaker Fellowship for Old South. She was field producer for Rebirth over its 10-year production. Her first feature, Learning to Swallow, premiered at Silverdocs and toured with Southern Circuit in 2005. Beverly has received a Kohl Artists Fellowship, a Flaherty Seminar Fellowship and grants from the Paul Robeson Fund for Independent Media, the Lucius & Eva Eastman Fund, NYSCA and the Puffin Foundation. She also teaches documentary filmmaking (most recently at Marquette University and the University of Notre Dame) and works as a documentary cameraperson. For more information on the film and filmmaker, visit http://petuniaproductions.net.

The Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers is a program of South Arts. Southern Circuit screenings are funded in part by a grant from South Arts in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts. South Arts, founded in 1975, is a nonprofit regional arts organization building on the South's unique heritage and enhancing the public value of the arts. Their work responds to the arts environment and cultural trends with a regional perspective through an annual portfolio of activities designed to address the role of the arts in impacting the issues important to its region, and linking the South with the nation and the world through the arts.
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