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'Drums' Fest Explores Overlap of Native, African Identities

By Aurelio Sanchez
Journal Staff Writer

Nancy Holley Hughes and Eileen Torpey hope their movie's untold story helps break so-called "cultural films" into the mainstream. Torpey, a producer for "The Resurrection of Honore Page: Black Cowgirl," said the movie is an independent film now, but she's hoping it will have broad appeal by the time it's released in two or three years. Torpey and movie screenwriter Hughes will discuss the movie and other issues at 12:45 p.m. Friday as part of a panel during a film festival: "All Drums: A Celebration of African and Native-American Film & Culture." The event will explore cultural crossings of blacks and Native Americans from the 17th century to present, and how Afro-Native issues are being, and can be, treated in film.

A major aim of the festival is to tell untold stories of the cultures, some brutally honest and others poignantly loving. It's also to raise awareness and to find ways of telling the stories so they are universally appealing, organizers said. "The idea is to create an event where artists and filmmakers can engage their own history and create projects that will have appeal to broadbased audiences," Hakim Bellamy, program specialist for the state Office of African American Affairs, said in a phone interview. "We're hoping this becomes an annual event that can be embraced by all cultures with equal fervor," he said.

The festival is aimed not only at the viewing public, but at film industry professionals and potential young moviemakers. Hughes, a black Cherokee, wrote the screenplay for "The Resurrection of Honore Page," a story "about a black woman of the cloth who experiences a crisis of faith as she follows her Cherokee heritage to a New Mexico ghost town." "I happened to be writing a film that looks at the cultural identities of blacks and Native Americans and how they negotiate the pathways of being both black and Native American," Hughes said. "I think it's a story that is not only interesting and compelling, but also one that is set here, in the West," she added. "The main character is negotiating terrains, some that are familiar and some that aren't." Hughes acknowledged that the story is in some ways auto-biographical. "It does pull some things from my own life, and it draws from historical events as well," she said. Torpey described the film as a modern-day Western with universal themes of faith and courage.

The "All Drums" festival will also feature a film screening of "Black Indians: An American Story," a documentary detailing the racial fusion of Native Americans and African-Americans.

Other film screenings at the festival will include:

"American Red & Black: Stories of Afro-Native Identity." Directed by Alicia Woods, a 39-minute film that follows six Afro-Native Americans from around the country as they reflect upon issues affecting their own identities, their heritage and racism within their own communities.

"Picking Tribes," a short film directed by S. Pearl Sharp that looks at the often hilarious story of a girl in the 1940s torn between her African and Native American heritage.

"Through Martha's Eyes," a 42-minute film directed by Chuck Cranston, based on real events in Kansas Territory, which tells the story of Martha, a young African-American woman who is sold into slavery in Missouri to the leader of the Shawnee Mission Indian School in Kansas.

"Singing Our Stories," directed by Annie Frazier Henry, a 60-minute look at the lives and musical roots of aboriginal women from across North America.

Also running concurrently with the festival will be the Buffalo Soldier exhibition, showing throughout February at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. The event is co-sponsored by the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center and the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs. A tentative schedule for the event is available at www.oaaa.state.nm.us.

If You Go:

WHAT: "All Drums: A Celebration of African and Native American Film & Culture"

WHEN: 10 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 1

WHERE: Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, 2401 12th NW

HOW MUCH: Free with \$1 admission to the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center