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## UCLA theater student portrays teen in coming-of-age indie film

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Sionne Elise, a fourth-year theater student, had her film debut in the indie film "Knowing Nothing Cold," which was directed by Jeff Kao. The film will screen Saturday at the South Park Center in Downtown Los Angeles. (Nick Kardan/Daily Bruin)

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"Knowing Nothing Cold" threw a group of amateur teen actors into the 1970s Midwest.

Directed by Jeff Kao, the indie film "Knowing Nothing Cold" examines Kao's own memories of adolescence in the 1970s Midwest, focusing on the struggles faced by a group of teenagers as they transition into adulthood. While some of the teenagers idolize their older siblings living provincial lives, others long to leave and enter the world outside of the isolated town, something Kao said was a major part of his experience growing up in Iowa.

Kao took on the task of recreating his childhood memories with a cast of actors with little to no acting experience, including fourth-year theater student Sionne Elise. Kao said he chose a cast of beginner actors because the theater students from his original casting call couldn't tone down their exaggerated performances. Kao completed the film in November 2016, and will screen it Saturday at the South Park Center in downtown Los Angeles as part of the NewFilmmakers Los Angeles festival.

"I was horrified by how over-the-top most of the kids were in their acting," Kao said. "Film picks up everything; it's a completely different scale of performance than theater."

After numerous screen tests with students from Oakland School for the Arts, Kao and the film's producer Alison Hanson cast two student actresses, Elise and Nancy Kimball, who were able to rein in their performances for film. They also selected his daughter Emmalee Johnson-Kao and a group of her friends from the high school to play the lead roles of Tina, Dean, Stevie and Kelley.

Elise's supporting role as Jill was her first experience with a feature film. Elise said her character, the older sister of one of the main characters Stevie, was a challenge to play because she found it hard to tap into a character who was abusive to her young brother and enjoyed racist humor. The film itself was also challenging because as a theater performer she was new to the longer story arc, 12-hour-day shoots and intricate costumes in the world of film, she said.

"It was my first experience on a set, first experience knowing what being in front of a camera feels like," Elise said. "It was extraordinarily nerve-wracking, but because (Kao) was so kind and had a focus on companionship, it made me feel very comfortable."

Elise and the other new actors went through an intensive rehearsal process which included improvisation exercises and time spent getting to know each other on a personal level, Elise said.

Hanson said her familiarity with theater and improvisation gave her a strong platform to help the actors get comfortable with their roles. It was important to build rapport and trust between the director, producer and actors, especially since the actors were new to acting, Hanson said. She helped build trust by leading improvisation exercises during rehearsals and playing the minor role of Mrs. Pederson alongside the cast in one scene.

"I think with that trust created, the actors trust it when you throw out an idea in the middle of the scene and they're able to roll with it because they know that you have their back ultimately," Hanson said. "I don't think I was ever worried about working with actors who had less experience because the results were always terrific."

While the film was an educational experience for the actors, Kao said he also learned a lot about how he wanted the film to look and feel. The film's low budget made him worry about incorrectly portraying the '70s through the set and costume design, but he observed that the authenticity of the film revolved more around the performances given by the young actors, he said.

"It was really interesting for me because it wasn't so much directing actors, it was more like trying to help these kids discover acting in general," Kao said. "It was a thrilling sense of discovery that I had with them."

Elise also said the newer cast accurately represented the uncertainty in the young characters that Kao was aiming for in his coming-of-age story.

"I think adolescence is the same no matter what time period you're in, and I think that's something that's captured in this movie," Elise said. "Especially with just how the characters treat each other, it's not always kind, but it's also not like they're trying to be mean."



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