



Universal Signs

By Paola Segnini, Associate Editor

“Universal Signs,” written and directed by Ann Calamia, is a film about overcoming obstacles, self-forgiveness and finding happiness the only way it’s really possible – through human connection and love. The common stuff of movies, to be sure, but with a twist – the entire film is in American Sign Language, captioned in English.

“There’s nothing like the experience of watching the film with an audience that’s filled with hearing individuals as well as Deaf or hard of hearing (D/HH) individuals. With the captions, everyone is enjoying the film together. It’s a real audience experience for both sides and it’s very fun that everyone in some way is taken out of their element,” says Calamia.

The lack of spoken words accentuates the camera movements, the color, the music – elements that often go unnoticed in other films but are center stage on this one, giving it more depth and intensity.

“In its film style, one can see echoes of ‘Pleasantville,’ ‘Traffic’ and ‘The Limey.’ Color, and the absence of color, is used as a creative story-telling technique. Color symbolizes emotion in ‘Universal Signs,’ until the main character reconnects with his world, he is unable to see the beauty of the color world around him,” informs www.universalsignsmovie.com.

“My inspiration for the movie came from wanting to talk about the invisible differences among people because I feel, that as a human society, we can reach out to each other when we know our differences, but when things are invisible, like deafness or even depression, we don’t reach out,” says Calamia.

Andy (Anthony Natale) is a troubled young deaf man haunted by his memories and conflicted about his past. He lives detached from coworkers and immersed in the

sadness of a recent tragedy, which the viewer sees in anachronous flashbacks. His life takes an unexpected turn when he meets Mary, a new librarian at the college where he works, who slowly starts bringing out the best in him.

“Andy as a character was very emotional. At heart, he is a sweet, nice man,” says Natale. “He is just caught up in his own tragedy and must find a way out. The story was one that I could not help but get caught up in. Even before I was half way through the script, I was trying to define my character,” recalls Natale.

The movie, which won Philadelphia Film Festival’s Full Length Movie Award, conveys a D/HH person’s realities in ways to which a hearing viewer cannot help but relate, albeit briefly. For many, this movie may be the first time they experience what it feels like to not be able to hear and to have to pay close attention so they won’t miss something important.

“This film is created for all audiences. It really bridges these worlds and cultures,” explains Natale.

Indeed, the movie’s universal themes do not distinguish between a hearing or deaf audience – the emotional response is the same.

“For the Deaf audience, it is a great way to reach across that barrier and say, ‘Hey, we’re just the same as you. We have the same feelings of isolation, love, loss, connection and forgiveness.’ That’s why it’s called ‘Universal Signs.’ We are all part of one human culture,” says Calamia.

Calamia and Catherine Miller, the film’s producer, are currently pursuing self-distribution. To request a screening of the film at a venue near you or to pre-order “Universal Signs” on DVD, visit www.universalsignsmovie.com. ■