

A Very Good Year



A man and a woman sit on opposite sides of a glass partition in relative silence. Is he in prison? A mental institution? Did he kill? Steal? It's clear that she's deserting him, but what was their relationship? And what are their names?

For filmmaker and Howard University Professor Daniel Williams, dialogue is overrated. In his latest film, *A Thousand Days a Year*, a

squint, a scowl, or an outstretched hand can be worth 1,000 words. A telephone may ring not to be answered, but to serve as a metaphor for alienation and loneliness.

"The film has an open aesthetic—to allow you to interpret it in ways that come to you," Williams said at a screening last November. Afterward, sitting in his dimly lit campus office with a life-sized Orson Welles poster behind him and a crab reaching up from his gumbo, he added, "It's really about exploring an experience, an emotion."

Williams has been attracted to the cinema since he was 10—the year he first saw *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*. In the ninth grade, he bought a video camera with his lawn-mowing money and began directing three-minute films. He shot one about soldiers-turned-cannibals stranded in the woods after a nuclear war and another about a man traveling through time in a '74 Camaro. But eventually, the potentially exorbitant costs of creating science-fiction films brought Williams down to earth. He adopted a minimalist aesthetic—as much an expression of his budget as his artistic vision—and decided to make films about "everyday people." To save on production costs, he even shipped *A Thousand Days* (which took four years to complete) to Toronto for film processing and sound work, taking advantage of the exchange rate.

Last October, Williams paid \$25 to join more than 3,000 filmmakers vying for 60 screening slots in the Sundance Film Festival. In mid-December, he joined the rejected thousands.

"If I had gotten in, it wouldn't have changed anything about my life....I'd still have the same problems [funding my films]," says Williams. "I understand my film and who I am. I'm a black filmmaker with an extremely low-budget short film, which for a large part is really inaccessible to a lot of audiences....I entered my film because, you know, why not?"

Besides, it wasn't such a long shot. Williams, who has completed five short films, is no stranger to praise. *A Thousand Days* won Best of Show, the top award in the regional 2000 Rosebud Film and Video Awards, and his 1996 film, *Woman and Man*, won a plaque for Best Experimental Short from the Oakland, Calif.-based Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame. Williams has also been a finalist for the Eddie Murphy/Paramount Writing Fellowship. Still, the indie filmmaker knows that completion is its own award.

"A plaque is useless. It's nice. It's pretty. I can put it on my wall. But it doesn't help me make another film," says Williams, who, with the Rosebud award, was able to shoot *Fragment*, completion date unknown. "A good award for a filmmaker is money or something that allows [him] to make another film."

—Nefretiti Makenta