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‘Back’ to the future: Alum Leah Bleich returns to campus with her first feature film

It’s always a delight to browse the Internet and discover a low-budget movie you love has popped up on a major streaming service.

It’s even more exciting when the movie in question is yours.

UC Santa Barbara graduate Leah Bleich ’17 recently had that somewhat surreal experience. She unexpectedly learned that “The Moon and Back,” her first — and, to date, only — feature film, is streaming on Paramount Plus.

“I had no idea!” she said with a laugh. “Our main actress, Isabel May, is the lead of ‘Yellowstone 1883’ (also on the streamer), so apparently it was something Paramount was interested in programming.”

Also interested: UCSB’s Carsey-Wolf Center, which will screen Bleich’s film at 7 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 21, at Pollock Theater. The free event, part of the center’s ongoing series “Storytelling for the Screen,” also will feature a discussion between Bleich and Professor Ross Melnick about the movie and how her time at UC Santa Barbara prepared her for a professional career.

“I am really drawn to stories that sit at the intersection of joy and pain — stories that try to make you laugh and cry at the same time,” the 29-year-old writer and director said in an interview from her Los Angeles home. “‘Little Miss Sunshine’ is the kind of movie I want to make. My favorite movie of all time, by far, is ‘Harold and Maude.’

“For me, dark comedies feel like an honest way to reflect the human spirit. Life is ridiculous! There’s irony in the grandeur we give our everyday lives, to make our small existence feel big. I love filmmakers like the Coen brothers who cut through that in biting and fun ways.”

Joe Palladino, a retired member of the film and media studies faculty who worked closely with Bleich during her time at UC Santa Barbara, loves that drive and ambition. “’The Moon and Back’ has a real charm,” he said. “It feels a bit like ‘Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl.’ I want to celebrate her.”

Originally from Palo Alto, Bleich was introduced to visual culture early in life by her mother, who ran a graphic-design business. “She taught me photoshop when I was a little kid,” the filmmaker recalled.

In terms of movies, “I grew up with Harry Potter and the ‘Chronicles of Narnia’,” she said. “It was the fantasy that got me! I wanted to be a part of these extraordinary worlds.”

Her first impulse was to go into acting — she appeared in a number of high-school plays — but she had left that behind by the time she enrolled at UC Santa Barbara.

“I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do with my career,” Bleich recalled. “Then I took a film class as a random elective. It clicked so intensely!

“I had spent my whole life relishing movies, but with a limited understanding of how a person could get involved in them. It was really exciting. A world opened up for me. I found this thing I loved had all kinds of career possibilities attached to it.”

Bleich got heavily involved in the film department, taking on the leadership of “The Filmmakers’ Co-op,” a previously defunct club for aspiring student filmmakers. She regularly pushed club members — and herself — to make one short film after another, to gain experience and learn from mistakes.

“There was this joy about everything she did,” said Palladino, who noticed both her creativity and budding leadership skills. “(She and her companions) were a very happy group. It was a ‘let’s put on a show’ kind of thing.”

“UCSB was the right place for me,” Bleich said. “It enabled me to have a lot of organic experiences as I was figuring out what I want to do. I had so many opportunities to try different things. Students are given such flexibility.”

After graduation, she moved to Los Angeles and — cliché alert! — got a job in the mailroom of CAA, one of the town’s top talent agencies. She eventually moved to a small film studio, where she became “an accidental development executive,” where her role included searching for promising material.

“I had a stack of 8 to 16 scripts I had to read every week,” she recalled. “I was constantly networking — lunches and breakfasts and drinks. And I was also trying to write. It was a lot! Then the pandemic happened.”

Suddenly with time on her hands, Bleich sat down and wrote her first feature-length script in 2020. She then applied to a competition for first-time filmmakers, who were challenged to create a feature film on a miniscule $50,000 budget. She was one of the recipients, and shot “The Moon and Back” over nine days.

“The story is about a girl who is honoring her late father by making a movie from a script he wrote,” she said. “It’s not autobiographical: My dad is still alive! But I’m undoubtedly writing a version of myself.

“A lot of the emotion stems from my relationship with my parents. I included parts of conversation I had with my mom as a kid and used them as dialogue.”

The film was screened at a series of festivals, where it was warmly received, and she eventually signed a distribution deal with Grindstone Entertainment, a subsidiary of Lionsgate Films. It was released on Video on Demand in April, and at some point after that, made it into the Paramount Plus lineup.

Bleich is currently working on a variety of freelance projects and planning her next move. Her goals are clear: “I want to be a working director. I also want to have my own production company.”

She is thrilled to be returning to UC Santa Barbara, where she had the opportunity to make so many “silly films,” as she calls them. She has particularly fond memories of one, a parody nature documentary in which the narrator explored the bizarre world of a frat house.

“I’m a great proponent of the idea that the more bad things you make, the better you can become,” she said. “The faster you can do that, the more experience you have, the better quality you’re eventually going to produce. Anything I’ve made that’s any good is only because of all the silly projects along the way.”

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About UC Santa Barbara

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