

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Student Emmy nomination goes to UCSB team for 'The Circus Monkey'

A short film written by UC Santa Barbara student Travers Tobis was nominated for a College Television Award — an honor often referred to as a Student Emmy. Titled [“The Circus Monkey,” the film](#) is one of just three finalists nationwide, standing alongside two entries from University of Southern California’s graduate film program.

“The Circus Monkey” was created in UCSB’s yearlong Crew Production class, a hands-on filmmaking course co-taught by professors [Chris Jenkins](#) and [Wendy Jackson](#). The idea to submit the film for national recognition came after Jenkins attended a Media Educators Conference in Los Angeles last fall.

“There was a moment of clarity,” Jenkins said. “I watched the previous winners of the College Television Awards and thought, our students are creating work at this level — or beyond. I came back energized and urged them to submit.”

Tobis, a BFA student in the Department of Theater and Dance, wrote the film during a summer lull between his sophomore and junior years. Struggling to find footing in the acting world at UCSB, he drew inspiration from personal conversations with a close friend, a music major navigating similar doubts.

“Vivian Walden, the protagonist of the film, came out of that search for internal strength,” Tobis said. “I hoped to redefine success — not as fame or external

recognition, but as a love for the art itself. Tangible success can be a byproduct of that love, but it should never be the driving force.”

The title itself has an origin story rooted in real-life banter: Tobis once encouraged a cellist friend to keep playing for a guest, only for her to retort, “I’m not a circus monkey, Travers.” That moment sparked the entire premise: the tension between performative expectation and creative autonomy.

Starring Kirsten Høj and Blythe Davis — both from UCSB’s performing arts programs — the film was brought to life by a student crew led by producers Nathan Krachman, Kadrik Blatt and Rachel Burnette. Tobis credits the team’s professionalism and dedication for elevating the film beyond typical student fare.

“One of the first things I told Oliver Richards, our director of photography, was that I didn’t want people to say, ‘It’s good for a student film.’ I just wanted it to be *good*,” he said.

The production wasn’t without its challenges. At one point, professors Jenkins and Jackson urged the crew to recast a lead role after a cello performance came across as inauthentic. The team pivoted, casting Davis — a real cellist with no prior acting experience — who brought depth and believability to the screen.

“This is exactly the kind of teaching moment that makes this class so impactful,” Jenkins said. “We want students to not only create, but to problem-solve, collaborate, and rise to a professional level of storytelling.”

For Tobis, the nomination affirms that those long hours writing in his cramped Isla Vista apartment meant something.

“I think the most valuable part is just the recognition that the art you’re making is being seen,” he said. “That script — those words — meant something to me. Now they’re meaningful to others in ways I never imagined.”

Tobis’ next film, “Silk Flowers,” also produced through the Crew Production course, is currently in post-production and will be submitted to festivals later this year.

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About UC Santa Barbara

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