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High Schoolers Get Early Taste of Tinseltown

A two-week program at Loyola Marymount gives students from Crenshaw High a starring role in their own production.

By MICHELLE KELLER
Times Staff Writer

When it comes to showbiz, the dollar plays a starring role.

For Jasmin Williams, this was just one among many lessons she and 10 of her peers from Crenshaw High School took away from a two-week filmmaking program at Loyola Marymount University's School of Film and Television.

The summer program, in its inaugural year, was developed to give enterprising youths from the Los Angeles high school the opportunity to learn about many aspects of filmmaking and animation, from story development to postproduction.

Although the creative and technical processes dominated the lessons, professors acquainted the students with the realities of moviemaking in Tinseltown, where finances play a key part in the behind-the-scenes world.

On the fifth day of the program, the students, having worked on their scripts, launched into high gear. Inside the school's film stage in Westchester, a flurry of activity enlivened the darkened space. A couple of students rehearsed their lines. The director and the camera crew, made up of Crenshaw students and Loyola Marymount teaching assistants, worked to block the scene, figuring out where the actors would be when the camera started rolling.

As the crew started rehearsing, the professors informed the students that a scene had to be modified. The reason?

"We're tweaking the script for budgetary concerns," Marilyn Beker, a screenwriting professor, told Yesenia Bravo, a soon-to-be Crenshaw junior, and Mark Stephen Jr., who will be a senior. Both were actors in this particular scene. "You have to be quick on the set."

This imaginary wrench shifted the mood at the film stage.

Jasmin and fellow Crenshaw student Michael Soria, playing the roles of the writer and the director, respectively, shuffled to the corner to discuss the change. A small argument developed.



Photographs by GLENN KOENIG Los Angeles Times

MOVIE TIPS: Crenshaw High School student Ricardo Plata gets instructions from professor Charles Swanson while working on the stage at a two-week filmmaking program, which is offered by Loyola Marymount University's School of Film and Television.



"TOON TALK: Animation professor Kathy Baur, left, instructs Crenshaw High student Brittany Little.

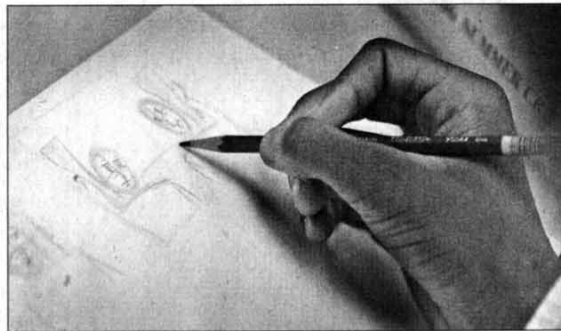
Lesson No. 1: Adapt to change. Quickly.

"I love what's going on over there," said School of Film and Television Dean Teri Schwartz as she watched the students quibble. "The writer and the director are discussing the script," Schwartz said. "That never happens," she added with a laugh.

By the time the two finally came to an agreement, the rest of the crew had lost focus.

Lesson No. 2: Time equals money.

Sylvia Morales, an assistant professor of film, pulled Michael aside. It was time for a one-on-one session on how to take charge as a director.



AT WORK: Crenshaw student Jehlali Chatman works on an animation project. Eleven students from the school were chosen for the program.

"Remember, time is the enemy," Morales told Michael, who recently finished his senior year at Crenshaw. "The money is leaving your pockets. It's leaving your producer's pockets. At some point, you have to call everyone together and say something like, 'What's going on? Let's get back to work!'"

As they went through the filmmaking process and worked on creating a total of four films — two animated and two live-action — Schwartz and other professors attempted to expose students not only to the exciting, if challenging, world of moviemaking, but to college as well.

"We hope that this program

will be a way to nurture and develop remarkable young talent," Schwartz said. "We hope to show them what it takes to come to the university. The hope is that there will be some returnees. The success will be in the follow-up."

The students in the summer program were all chosen from Crenshaw's New Media Academy, a school within a school that introduces them to the world of filmmaking and animation early on. For many of the students, the media program is a way to encourage them to succeed despite the neighborhoods some come from, where opportunities are scarce, school officials say.

"We are a school with a lot of challenges," said George Tucker, media academy coordinator and an advisor at Crenshaw High. "The school is 75% African American and 25% Hispanic, and many students are economically challenged. It is a school that has a lot of the challenges from the community in which we live."

Tucker works hard to show his students a life outside the circumstances they may have grown up in.

"One of the things we try to do is develop partnerships, including with private industry or learning institutions, to augment the kinds of things we're doing in the classroom," he said.

In an effort to make the program accessible, it is free of charge.

Dreams of box-office hits and celebrity success lie in the future for the students, but for now, just getting it right will do.

On the film stage, everyone got in place to run through the final scene.

"Places!"
"Camera ready?"
"Actors ready?"
"Action!"

Yesenia and Mark ran through their scene, recalling their on-the-go learned lines. Jasmin, trying her part as a director, scanned the frames and nudged Ricardo Plata, serving as a cameraman, to zoom in on Yesenia.

"That was good," Morales said encouragingly. Faces lit up and smiles appeared.

The fast-paced program left students excited about their futures in the industry.

"I'm hoping to get better in my writing skills so I can be a screenwriter someday," said Jasmin, who will be a senior.

Then again, she said, "maybe I'll be a director."