

# A Professor and a Student Contribute Works at Sundance Film Festival

BY KRISTIN STERLING

Two Columbians contributed to films at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, which has its awards ceremony this Saturday. School of the Arts Professor Thomas Roma shot the photographs used in the documentary *Let the Church Say Amen*, directed by David Petersen. And a short film by student Jowan Carbin, SOA '04, *Welcome to Life*, was screened in the shorts program. Last year, the film festival's top prize went to *American Splendor*, by SOA alumni Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini.

*Amen* director Peterson had been thinking about making a film on black churches when he came across a book by Roma, *Come Sunday* (MOMA/Abrams, 1996), a collection of 86 photographs of African-American churches throughout Brooklyn. Roma spent more than three years working on the photographs in *Come Sunday*; he attended 150 services in 52 churches, and the book was published in conjunction with a one-person exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1996. Roma, the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, worked on this project as part of the second fellowship.

Deeply impressed by Roma's book, Petersen contacted him about a collaboration. Within months, Petersen identified the World Missions for Christ Church in Washington, D.C., as a setting for his powerful documentary. The film shows how one church

nourishes love and hope in its members, whose lives are riddled with hardship, and incorporates Roma's black-and-white photographs of the congregation made for the film.

"This documentary does not depict the typical use of black-and-white photos in film," Roma said. "It incorporates moving imagery and still imagery in an interesting way. It begins with a moving color image, then cuts to the next scene with a moving black-and-white image, and then cuts to one of my black-and-white photos."

Roma was also glad to have the opportunity to work again with Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates, who wrote the introductions to Roma's *Come Sunday* and another book, *Sanctuary* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), served as *Amen*'s executive producer.

The film is one of 24 documentaries selected from more than 2,500 entries to screen at Sundance. The film will have its national broadcast debut on PBS on Easter Sunday, April 11. It will also be screened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., on the same day. The Office of the University Chaplain will host a screening of the film on campus prior to the PBS broadcast.

The selection process for the documentary section of Sundance is highly competitive, and Jowan Carbin likewise faced stiff competition for a slot in the short films program. *Welcome to Life* is among 86 short films selected from 3,400 submissions from



This intense untitled photograph of a church service by Thomas Roma was used in the film *Amen*.

around the world. The short films at Sundance have become a favorite for festival-goers, and their directors are considered by production companies and agents as a talent pool of new artists.

Wanting to tell the story of an outsider, it took Carbin seven months to write the script for *Welcome to Life*. The film is the story of a sixth-grader who longs to be playing outside. When the boy and his only friend make a pact to remain pals forever, the moment is destroyed by the emergence of the school bully. The film was shot on location in Washington, D.C., in 2002, during the period of the sniper attacks, and Carbin had to cut a large playground

scene featuring 30 children from the film, as many parents were reluctant to allow their children to participate in the outdoor filming.

Despite this setback, Carbin, who served as the writer, director, editor and executive producer, created a film that is being acknowledged around the country. Last year he won Best Student Short Film 15 Minutes and Under at the Palm Springs International Short Film Festival. He also took second place at the San Francisco Black Film Festival and was a regional finalist for a Student Academy Award. *Welcome to Life* was also one of five films selected for the American Black Film Festival and has screened at the Newport Inter-

national Film Festival as well as the Urbanworld, Cinematexas and Fort Lauderdale festivals.

While Carbin will participate in the short film screening, Kazuo Ohno, SOA '02, was selected to participate in the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, Jan. 9-14. The Screenwriters Lab is a five-day writers workshop that gives 12 independent artists the opportunity to work intensively on their feature film scripts with the support of established screenwriters. Ohno worked on his feature-length script, *Mr. Crumpacker and the Man from the Letter*. Four films from previous Sundance Feature Film Labs screened at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival.