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## Director Radha Blank: 'Filmmaking is activism'

By Jordan Hampton

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Director/writer/actor Radha Blank

NEW ORLEANS (October 30, 2020) – Director/writer/actor Radha Blank, whose film “The Forty-Year-Old Version” won a Sundance award and debuted Oct. 9 on Netflix, encouraged young filmmakers to live and experience the world to find their voice.

Addressing a crowd Oct. 16 in a virtual talk hosted by Dillard University and Howard University, Blank called making films a form of activism, adding, “You can’t make a film until you have lived and experienced the world yourself.”

Blank drew loosely on her own life experiences to create the movie, which is about a woman playwright with the same name facing her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday and feeling she hasn’t lived up to her potential from a decade ago when she was named among the “Top 30 under 30.” As a result, she decides to become a rapper and finds her authentic voice. It is a movie with comedy and hopefulness.

Some real-life facts from Blank’s life include being a playwright, losing her mother (“a pivotal moment in my life”) and being disdainful of “poverty porn,” the kind of tragic black life portrayal that she feels is valued by cultural gatekeepers that the film character raps about.

Other facts, however, veer away from Blank's real history. In the movie, the character Radha has had only one play produced and ends up teaching theater to high schoolers. The real Blank has had one play produced, but she also has written shows for "Empire" and for the TV spin-off of Spike Lee's "She's Gotta Have It."

"The Forty-Year-Old Version" seems to pay homage to Lee's earlier work because it was filmed in grainy, 35-mm black and white. Blank said she considers Lee to be a mentor, and she filmed in black and white because "it was more natural and the skin tones appear nice."

Even so, she spoke of hardships along the way, such as being fired from one position after a third script was rejected.

As a director, Blank said she allowed her cast to be themselves and play the part as they saw it: "I'm the conductor, but I'm not going to teach you how to play the tuba."

She said she made the independent film, which includes scenes in her real apartment and her brother as one of the actors, for \$4 million.

(For comparison, between 1999 and 2018, half of all movies released in U.S. cinemas cost under \$18 million to make, according to film data research Stephen Fellow. But Investopedia.com puts the average cost of a major movie studio at more like \$65 million.)

"The Forty-Year-Old Version" has received positive reviews both locally and globally, she said. And she's been featured in the New York Times and The Atlantic, among others.

Blank said, "People from different countries have contacted me telling me they like the film."