

'Roleplay' documentary premiere amplifies Tulane alumni voices

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At SXSW 2024 in March, a group of recent alumni of the performing arts and digital media practices at Tulane University's School of Liberal Arts stepped into the spotlight for the world premiere of a documentary based on their own original collegiate play.

"Roleplay" is a 90-minute feature film that covers the topic of sexual violence on college campuses and captures the development of the theater project.

The development of the play's script was a collaboration between then Adjunct Professor Darci Fulcher (now producer), filmmaker Katie Mathews (director, producer), and Assistant Professor of Theatre Jenny Mercein (producer), alongside fifteen undergraduate students and in partnership with Goat in the Road Productions.

The documentary debut at the annual Austin festival was met with critical acclaim. "One of the best docs I've seen so far this year is Katie Mathews' "Roleplay," a film that truly surprised me because it does what so few films like this are willing to do: It lets its subjects be messy, unpredictable, and human," said Brian Tellerico of rogerebert.com.

"I am deeply inspired by this generation of artists who helped us see that to understand and shift a culture that supports toxic behavior, we needed to explore the grey areas of complicity and consent where answers are not easy," said executive producer Jenny Mercein, also assistant professor of theatre at Tulane. "These brave students led with vulnerability and authenticity, resulting in a film of undeniable power."

The stage play's first mounting enjoyed a sold-out run in 2019 — with the original cast winning the Big Easy Theatre Award for 'Best Ensemble' — and was remounted in 2023.

Most of the original "Roleplay" cast — Aaron Avidon, Carl "CJ" Briggs Jr., Ross Brill, Alexandra Elam, Hannah Gordon, Grace Harmon Graugnard, Robert Holmes-A'court, Miranda Jo Kramer, Nagelle LeBoyd, Hailey Mozzachio and Lucy Sartor — sat in the theater's back row, reunited for the first time since their time together as students. The group collectively laughed, cheered and gasped along with the crowd, emotional to finally see their work on a big, festival screen.

Aaron Avidon (SLA '21), who played Lachlan, said, "I first approached the process of creating the stage play thinking I knew what I needed already — I understood the 'black and white' of so many things. But as I grew through the process of creating ... I grew to better understand myself, my role in a community, and how I can be the best ally for the people around me."

Noted Miranda Jo Kramer (SLA '21), who played the role of Elle, "'Roleplay' allowed me to access things I had shoved down, offer myself compassion, and learn how to show up for others. It altered the way I saw myself on campus and inspired me to

continue to pursue performance-based work as a force for change.”

The “Roleplay” reach has since expanded, in both formats. In mid-April, it was one of three films featured at the Yale Student Film Festival and Louisiana State University is full steam ahead on its own production, with an LSU Theatre mainstage undergraduate production opening on their Baton Rouge campus in March 2025.