

Chrissy a hit in New York

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Some of the cast of Chrissy, the movie that was screened in New York recently. (Picture compliments Jeffrey Grannum.)

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Tribeca is more than an upscale community of expensive high-rise apartment buildings, office towers, fashionable boutiques and chic restaurants. It has given birth to one of America's most successful film festivals.

Held in the spring, the Tribeca Film Festival allows the general public to experience the creativity of independent national and international movie producers from about 80 countries.

That's why it made eminent sense for the producers of Chrissy, the Barbados-made movie that focuses on the perils of bullying, to screen their film at the Tribeca cinema. And when they did it on a recent Friday evening to a sold-out house, complete with a red-carpet reception, everyone left with smiles on their faces.

"I thoroughly enjoyed it and you couldn't help but compliment the young talent, the producers and Mac Fingall," said Heather Burnett-Gainey, a Bajan mother who lives in Yonkers.

"The movie was certainly worth the effort to come into Manhattan to see it."

Although the film wasn't part of the festival which ended in April, the link with Tribeca – whose key mover and shaker is Robert De Niro, the internationally famous actor – sent a message of confidence to Step By Step Productions, the company that gave the Caribbean the series of two Hush movies and now Chrissy.

But there was another key reason why the New York screening was pertinent.

Bullying is a hard fact of life for many youths in the five boroughs. In the past 15 months, three boys and girls took their own lives in Manhattan, Staten Island and Queens, all because classmates made their lives hell.

Indeed, a few days after the Chrissy screening, a girl in Queens killed herself. On Staten Island, a vulnerable teenage girl couldn't take it anymore and jumped in front of a train last year to escape the torment. Last June, a Harlem youth also committed suicide.

"Far too many people, especially adults, don't recognize the impact of bullying and what it does to young people," said Mac Fingall, a former schoolteacher who is devoting much of his time these days to speaking out about young people in Barbados. "The movie shows how bullying can be tackled without going to the extreme of suicide."

A prominent Caribbean entertainer best known for his music and comedy, Fingall played the role of the overbearing principal of Chrissy's school. He had warned the New York audience before the

screening that the film “would take you through a variety of emotions” and would demonstrate the confidence of the young actors. He was right on the money.

Actually, it tells the story of a poor student who faces relentless bullying and a barrage of disparaging comments from classmates and teachers, not to mention a hostile principal, all of whom are unsympathetic to her economic and social plight.

Constant teasing and ridicule, including complaints about her underarm odour, fail to dampen her spirit or enthusiasm for education. Amazingly, she was able to deal with her ailing mother’s condition and the family’s inability to pay rent for the ramshackle home in which they lived plus the demands of a boorish landlord while staying on top of her school work.

Some of her teachers didn’t help. Their indifference was a lesson for teachers everywhere about how not to deal with such a trying case. In the end, though, a male teacher who recognized her outstanding ability and a white classmate and parent ignored the hostility and forged a relationship with Chrissy that ended up with her on the school’s team in a national competition. Her presence enabled the school to win the contest and monetary prizes.

Marcia Weekes, who wrote the script and produced the film, said she was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support in the diaspora.

“Diligence and faith in God can play key roles in helping to overcome any challenge,” she said.

“The children who appeared in the film were easy to work with. The extensive pre-production work and the support of the Barbados Investment and Development Corporation and Merville Lynch, who gave us the use of his equipment, were indispensable to the successful making of the film.”

Her husband Dave Weekes agreed.

“We have had excellent response from the diaspora in England, Canada and now the United States, and that’s gratifying,” he said.

More screenings are being held in New Jersey and Massachusetts before the cast and producers return home.

The positive messages of the film weren’t lost on the audience.

“You couldn’t help but admire Chrissy and how she handled the situation,” said Basyl Barrow, a Bajan in the city.