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INSIDE: *A multihyphenate artist takes Sacramento by storm.*



Renaissance Woman

Imani Mitchell is an actor, filmmaker and so much more.

📷 JUSTIN SOTELO

BY JESSICA LASKEY

When describing Imani Mitchell, one word just won't suffice. She's an actor, writer, director, producer, activist, mother—many descriptors that add up to one towering creative mind in the body of a 30-year-old multidisciplinary artist.

"I'm interested in the gray of life," says Mitchell, a proud Sacramento native and Sacramento City College alumna. "We all know that the polarizing thinking of 'that's wrong' or 'that's right' isn't life. I'm interested in showing the messiness of all of us and the humanity in everything."

Mitchell's projects, from short films to stage plays, do just that. Listen in as we discuss her inspiration across an impressive spectrum of creative pursuits.



How did you first get into writing? I've been writing since I was a kid—I was always into creative fiction. I didn't have plans to be a novelist or anything, but I knew I liked creating stories and characters. The first [screenplay] I ever wrote was for [the feature film] "Whirlpool" in 2018. I went for the full shebang—I had never written a script before, but I did a ton of research and went to YouTube "university." After that I wrote a short film, so I kind of worked backwards. Then I got into stage plays, like "Zora & Langston" (which Mitchell will also direct for Expressions Theatre Company sometime this year or next). I have other shorts and concepts that haven't been actualized yet, but right now I've completed a total of five projects.

What inspires the content of your writing? It comes from my experience as an actor. The stories I'm drawn to writing are what I wish was out there. Finding characters with substance, meat and grit to them was hard to define, which is what fueled my writing "Whirlpool." I'm drawn to talking about things that are uncomfortable or complex or difficult for people, topics that resonate and are relatable. The short film I wrote and just finished shooting and acting in, "The Second Pill," covers the topic of abortion. I write about topics like that—things that are uncomfortable and taboo, but very real things people go through.

"Whirlpool" is now on Amazon Prime and your other short films, "Invisible Man" and "I Remember Yesterday," are available on YouTube. How do you decide where to release your projects? Submitting to festivals is expensive and you're taking a gamble—you won't know if they'll like your work. I'm of the belief that we create art to be consumed. I want people to see it. When I put "I Remember Yesterday" up on YouTube,

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I also did an in-person screening. That's the most rewarding part: to connect to the audience and talk about what resonates with them.

You say that acting has informed your writing. What kinds of projects have you been involved in? I've done a wide gamut of things. I got my start in theater. It was my first love and it's where I received most of my training as an actor. I've worked at Celebration Arts, Capital Stage, B Street Theatre and I recently understudied at Sacramento Theatre Company. I've done a little bit of film (including acting in her own projects) and I just signed with a Cast Images agent, so I'm getting more into commercial work. Commercial work is good but very technical—you're in your head a lot and you're not really emoting.

What have been some of your favorite acting experiences? I had a really cool opportunity to perform a staged reading of a one-woman play, "Re/Memori" by Nambi E. Kelley, at B Street as part of the National New Play Network. I played three different characters and I was up there for 25 minutes—just me—and it made me so happy. I'm not always able to show what I can do. Not to be braggadocious, but I'm sometimes confined to roles that are one-dimensional. People were coming up to me (after "Re/Memori") saying, "Oh, you can act!" It really got my gears going. A one-woman show is a remarkable type of feat.

Do you find that you're type-cast into specific roles? The way a lot of these theaters have been systemically run, the default (casting) is white. It's not necessarily malicious; it's just something

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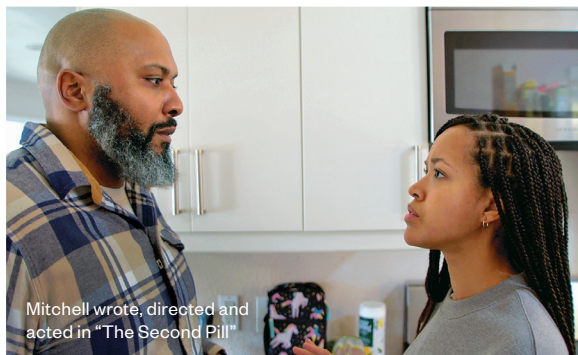
that's done. When I got cast in "The Nether" at Capital Stage, I played a detective. The part doesn't indicate the race of anyone in the play and the part had nothing to do with race. I was just solving crimes. It was great! I'll also be in "JUMP" at B Street in a couple months. The show is about a young woman grieving the loss of her sister—I'm playing the sister, Judy. When I read it, I thought, "Wow!" [It shows] a Black family going through grief and loss. Those are the stories I'm really interested in. We experience the spectrum of human emotion just like everyone else does: grief, heartbreak, immense joy. Those are the stories I really want to tell.

Did acting get you into directing? Yes! Being an actor onstage, you're seeing the director work and it's such a cool job—to have a vision and bring it to life, to craft moments. I love acting, but you're also just there to act. If you have opinions, that's not really your job. I kept thinking about how I would do things a little bit differently. Then I realized, maybe I should just direct. "Whirlpool" was my first venture into directing and got me more comfortable with it. It helped me understand the artistic side, of course, but also the leadership of directing. You set the tone of the set and the cast. You have to create an environment where actors feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable; otherwise it just doesn't work.

It seems like you've caught the directing bug. You've done a lot of projects since then! Yes, I directed my first stage play, "Pipeline" by Dominique Morisseau, at Celebration Arts in 2021. I also directed a virtual production of "Bul-rusher" by Eisa Davis for them during the pandemic. Directing during the pandemic was so different and oddly very technical. You had to decide when people should change their Zoom background, when to turn off the cameras,



On the set of "I Remember Yesterday"



Mitchell wrote, directed and acted in "The Second Pill"

when people should exit. I might not do (a virtual production) again, but it was a way to keep theater alive during the pandemic. Then last year I directed “Love & Baseball” by Jerry Montoya at B Street and “What to Send Up When It Goes Down” by Aleshea Harris at Celebration Arts in April. That was a really powerful, challenging play to direct. It’s very unconventional and includes audience interaction. I also directed (the West Coast premiere of Jennifer Blackmer’s) “Predictor” at Capital Stage in June and July.

Let’s talk about activism. You co-founded Black Women United in 2016, a nonprofit you describe as “dedicated to the education, empowerment and advancement of Black women.” You also recently founded IAM Studios, a film company devoted to producing content that features actors of color. Tell me about how you see your work in the context of activism. I love using art for activism. Activism and representation have always been really important to me. When I got into filmmaking and transitioned to IAM Studios, I still tried to find ways to incorporate it into the work I do. I’m passionate about representation and what that looks like onscreen/onstage and offscreen as well. When I made “Whirlpool,” I was intentional about telling a human, relatable story but with Black actors. I scoured Sacramento for local actors and an equally diverse crew. I really try to be intentional when I’m casting. It’s important how you treat people—and that you pay people. “Whirlpool” didn’t have a lot of money but we paid people something.

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Hopefully down the road, my producer hat can widen to not just produce my own projects but also fund other works by local artists of color and women of color. . . . I don’t have the means to fully fund someone else’s project right now—I can barely fund my own—but I’m always asking, “How can I help you?” I want people to reach out to me with questions. I’m always willing to chat, share resources and help out to build community.

I have to ask about your daughter, having known you before she was born and now having seen her with you during various projects. I can’t believe she’s already 8 years old!

How do you see motherhood as an artist? It’s part of what motivates me to go as hard as I do. When I became pregnant with Halima, I had plans to go to LA and be a struggling actor and find my way to Hollywood. Suddenly all of that stopped and I freaked out. I thought, life’s done, that’s it, there’s nothing left for me. In reality, it gave me more encouragement and motivation to stay on the path to make sure I can live a life and for her to be able to see her mother doing her dreams, the things she’s called to do. I bring her with me to rehearsal—people often call her my “co-director” or “assistant director.” She’s totally used to the whole thing. She’s even done some acting onstage and she’ll ask me to do improv scenes with her at home. She definitely has the performing bug.

For more information, visit imanimitchell.com. **SI**



Capital Stage’s “The Nether”



Big Idea Theatre’s “This Is How It Happened”