

# BlackStar Announces 2023 Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab Fellows, Expands Program to Include Both Directors and Producers

4 teams of Philadelphia-based filmmakers will premiere short films at the next BlackStar Film Festival



Top Row (L to R): Zardosht Afshari, Aaron Brokenbough Jr, David Gaines, Elizah Turner.  
Bottom Row (L to R): Simone Holland, Stephanie Malson, ashley ijoema omoma, Samiyah Wardlaw.  
All images courtesy of the respective artists.

(Philadelphia, PA—November 17, 2022) **BlackStar Projects**—the premier organization celebrating visionary Black, Brown, and Indigenous film and media artists—today announced the second class of the [Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab](#), presented by Comcast’s Black Experience on Xfinity. Founded in 2021, the year-long fellowship supports and uplifts Black, Brown and Indigenous emerging and mid-career filmmakers in the Greater Philadelphia area by providing funding as well as access to mentorship, critical feedback, equipment, crews, and space.



Following the success of its first year, the Lab has expanded to include both directors and producers, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the filmmaking process. The newly-announced cohort is twice the size of last year's, featuring four filmmakers paired with four producers—eight individual fellows who will create four short films.

The 2023 Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab fellows are **Zardosht Afshari (Director)** and **Aaron Brokenbough Jr. (Producer)**; **David Gaines (Director)** and **Elizah Turner (Producer)**; **Simone Holland (Director)** and **Stephanie Malson (Producer)**; and **ashley ijoema omoma (Director)** and **Samiyah Wardlaw (Producer)**.

As with the inaugural class, BlackStar will act as an executive producer of the short films created through the Lab, and they will premiere during the next edition of the BlackStar Film Festival in August 2023 with opportunity for distribution on the Black Experience on Xfinity channel.

“In this second year of the Lab, we are excited to add a producing track, offering support for producers of color, who often receive fewer opportunities for mentorship in our region,” said **Maori Karmael Holmes, BlackStar's Chief Executive & Artistic Officer**. “Both directors and producers play a vital role in telling our communities' stories, and we're thrilled to honor their work and nurture their creativity through the Lab.”

“Discovery and support of diverse emerging content creators, like the filmmakers in this lab, is a top priority for our Black Experience on Xfinity channel,” said **Keesha Boyd, Executive Director, Multicultural Entertainment, Comcast**. “We couldn't be more thrilled to continue our support of the BlackStar team to further our company-wide mission of investing in and showcasing authentic culture driven stories.”

The 2023 Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab Films include:

### **An Endoscopy**

In director Zardosht Afshari and producer Aaron Brokenbough Jr.'s forthcoming project, a film student accompanies a newcomer Iraqi student for a medical procedure, with the agreement that he will be her subject in a documentary.

### **The Freedom to Fall Apart**

Directed by David Gaines and produced by Elizah Turner, the short will comprise an anthology of four disparate vignettes together questioning the function of shame within the Black American body politic.

#### **All That's Left**

Through their film, director Simone Holland and producer Stephanie Malson will tell the story of Mercedes, who struggles to differentiate reality from her imagination as she embarks upon a journey of self-exploration and relationships.

#### **Now That We've Killed Me**

Director ashley ijoema omoma and producer Samiyah Wardlaw will together realize the story of a mother, Ezienne, as she discovers the truth of her daughter's life on the eve of her daughter's funeral.

The Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab is open to emerging and mid-career filmmakers seeking to create short narrative, experimental, or hybrid projects in any genre. The inaugural cohort of fellows (2021-2022) included Bettina Escauriza, Jasmine Lynea, Xenia Matthews, and Julian Turner. Xenia Matthews was subsequently named one of the 25 New Faces of Independent Film by *Filmmaker Magazine* and Julian Turner's Lab-produced *The Big Three* was selected for the 58th Chicago International Film Festival.

Applications for next year's Lab will open in August 2023.

#### **About Zardosht Afshari**

Zardosht Afshari is an Iranian filmmaker whose work has screened in international film festivals in the U.S., Iran, Poland, Croatia, India, and Italy. He received his MA in Dramatic Literature from the University of Tehran in Iran and his MFA in Media Arts from Temple University after moving to the United States in 2019. He currently teaches film courses at Temple University while working on various film projects.

#### **About Aaron Brokenbough Jr.**

Aaron Brokenbough is a Philadelphia-based filmmaker with over 12 years of production experience. Aaron has worked with multiple award-winning directors, writers, artists, and multimedia creatives. Getting his start in community-based media, he started producing for the YouTube channel Entertainment Buffet before

producing art installations. He is the co-founder and producer for SlyTree Creative, a content-focused brand-building experience.

### **About David Gaines**

David A. Gaines (he/they) is a Black writer, filmmaker and performer born and raised in the greater Philadelphia area. His work examines Blackness, masculinity, Christianity and mental health through an intersectional lens, and seeks to strengthen community through vulnerable self-expression. He is an award-winning, nationally touring poet and fellow of The Watering Hole who holds several slam poetry championship titles, including 2017 College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational Champion and 4th rank in the 2018 Individual World Poetry Slam. In 2020, he was inaugurated as the Poet Laureate of Pennsylvania's Montgomery County. In 2021, David published his first collection of poems, "soft boy.", and his directorial debut poetry short film, "'fine china.", received international acclaim and won the 5th Weimar Poetry Film Award. His work has also been featured in the National Black Arts Festival, Button Poetry, Write About Now, VICE Media, among many others. When not writing, performing or fiddling with cameras, you can find David teaching poetry to Philly youth, playing video games on his PC and searching for the best homemade pickle recipe.

### **About Elizah Turner**

Elizah Turner began her journey as a unit still photographer on non-union film sets during the off season from the music touring industry. Fascinated with the overlap of the two worlds, she has since worked in various roles providing both creative and technical production for nonprofits, production companies, musical artists and political campaigns. Her career paths have varied but all have one thing in common: supporting creatives to create systems & processes in the midst of chaos. Elizah's focus in the film world is centered around highlighting stories told by writers and directors through a Black feminist lens. Her north star is equally invested in work that restructures the entertainment industry to empower and earnestly engage with artists of the global majority and the power of culture.

### **About Simone Holland**

With their storytelling grounded in reality, Simone uses subtle surrealism as her lens. They've worked as director and cinematographer on projects for Red Bull, Jazmine Sullivan, Bustle, Tone Stith, and Jamila Woods, and was a part of the creative direction team for the 2021 BET AWARDS; Simone focuses on amplifying the

voices of those who do not have the space. As a 2021 Emmy Award winning camera operator and a 2019 Mural Arts Philadelphia Black Artists fellow, Simone continues to push boundaries. Cross-pollinating her creative versatility, Simone applies her multi-disciplinary technical experience to her directorial and creative work as a current resident of the 2022 ROTATE program at YouTube and Wieden + Kennedy.

#### **About Stephanie Malson**

Stephanie Malson is a multi-hyphenate filmmaker and producer who is drawn to telling ancestral stories. Her recent short film, SLOW BURN, was an official selection of the Gary International Black Film Festival and the Baltimore International Black Film Festival. She produced the festival gem, OURIKA!, which premiered at BlackStar Film Festival. She is a co-producer on the upcoming feature documentary, ULRICK, which chronicles the life of Haitian master painter Ulrick Jean-Pierre. Her cinematography is featured in the short experimental film We Are Free Because of Harriet Tubman, which was also an official BlackStar Film Festival selection. Among many work-for-hire projects, she has produced work for Intercultural Journeys, The Debbie Allen Dance Academy, and ARRAY. She also teaches script writing part-time at Temple University. Stephanie holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Rosemont College.

#### **About ashley ijoema omoma**

ashley ijoema omoma is a filmmaker, writer, mover and interdisciplinary artist creating documentary & narrative films, experimental videos and visual installations. A daughter of Nigerian immigrants, much of her work is influenced by her nomadic upbringing which challenges ideals of a singular Black experience. Personal and communal liberation, Black interiority, Black femalehood and the complexities of migration & diaspora are recurring themes of her work often explored through music, memory, intimate findings in personal archives, love, intergenerational familial ties, definitions of home, self perception, juju and time travel.

#### **About Samiyah Wardlaw**

Samiyah Wardlaw is an independent filmmaker passionate about producing diverse, innovative and unique projects. A Philadelphia native, she graduated from Drexel University with a B.S. in Film and Television. With experience on both indie and commercial sets, Samiyah has ample experience as a producer, assistant director and production coordinator. She has produced several short films, and recently

directed and produced her debut feature film *Burn Out* which is currently in post-production. Samiyah is extremely excited to work with Ashley Omoma and bring *Now That We've Killed Me* to life!

*The BlackStar Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab is presented by Xfinity with additional support from the William Penn Foundation, All Ages Productions, Independence Public Media Foundation, Seven Knots Productions, Mellon Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, Gucci Changemakers Fund, and Expressway Cinema Rentals.*

For more information about the Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab, please visit <https://www.blackstarfest.org/lab/>.

### **About BlackStar Projects**

BlackStar Projects is the producer of the BlackStar Film Festival, an annual celebration of the visual and storytelling traditions of the African diaspora and global communities of color—showcasing films by Black, Brown, and Indigenous people from around the world. In addition to the acclaimed festival, BlackStar presents an array of programming across film and visual culture year-round, including the twice-annual journal *Seen*, the podcast *Many Lumens*, the William and Louise Greaves Filmmaker Seminar, and the Philadelphia Filmmaker Lab, among other initiatives.

### **Press Contacts**

Ed Winstead

Director, Cultural Counsel

[ed@culturalcounsel.com](mailto:ed@culturalcounsel.com)

Sam Riehl

Senior Account Executive, Cultural Counsel

[sam@culturalcounsel.com](mailto:sam@culturalcounsel.com)

Devon Ma

Account Coordinator, Cultural Counsel

[devon@culturalcounsel.com](mailto:devon@culturalcounsel.com)