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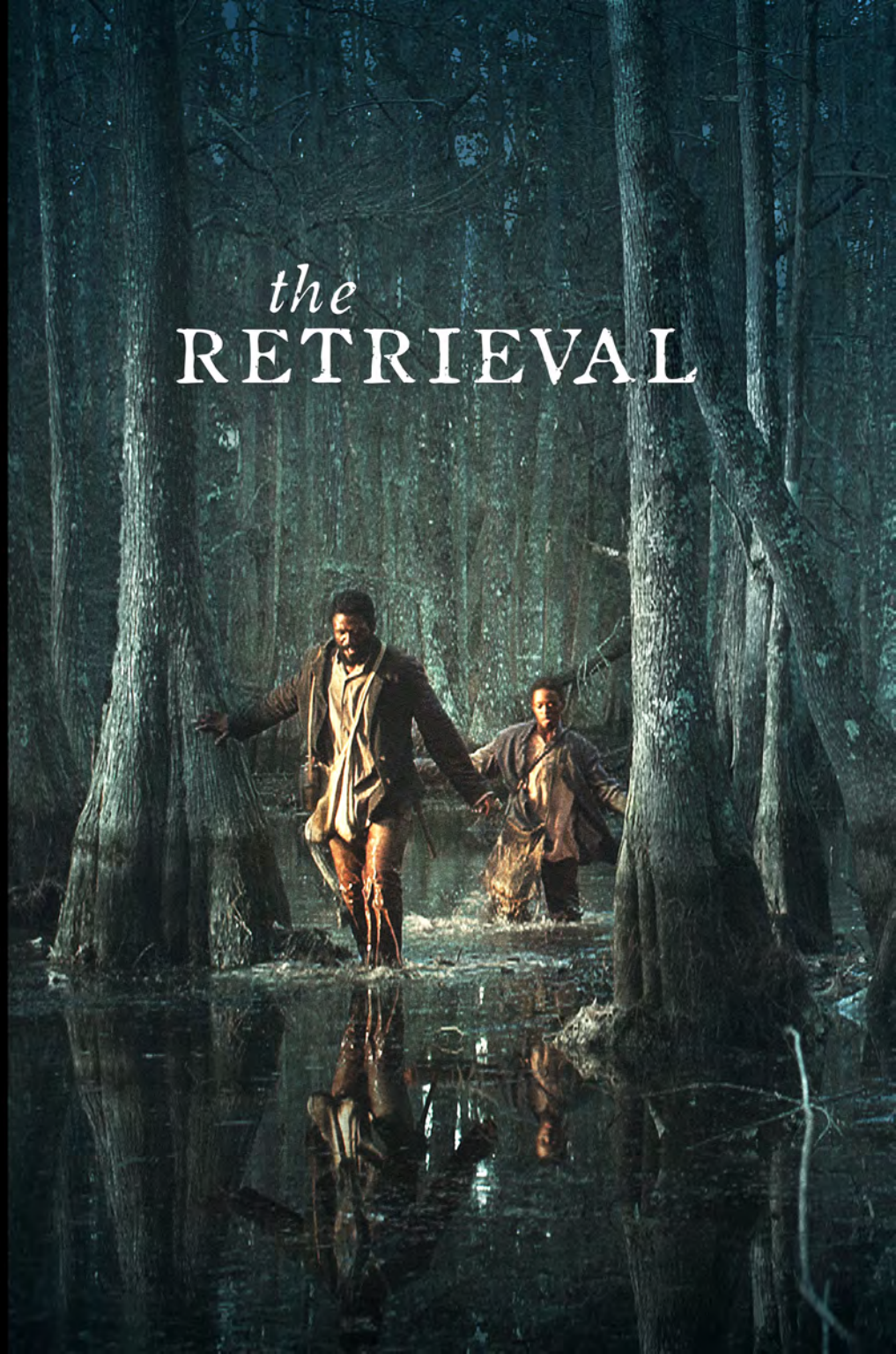


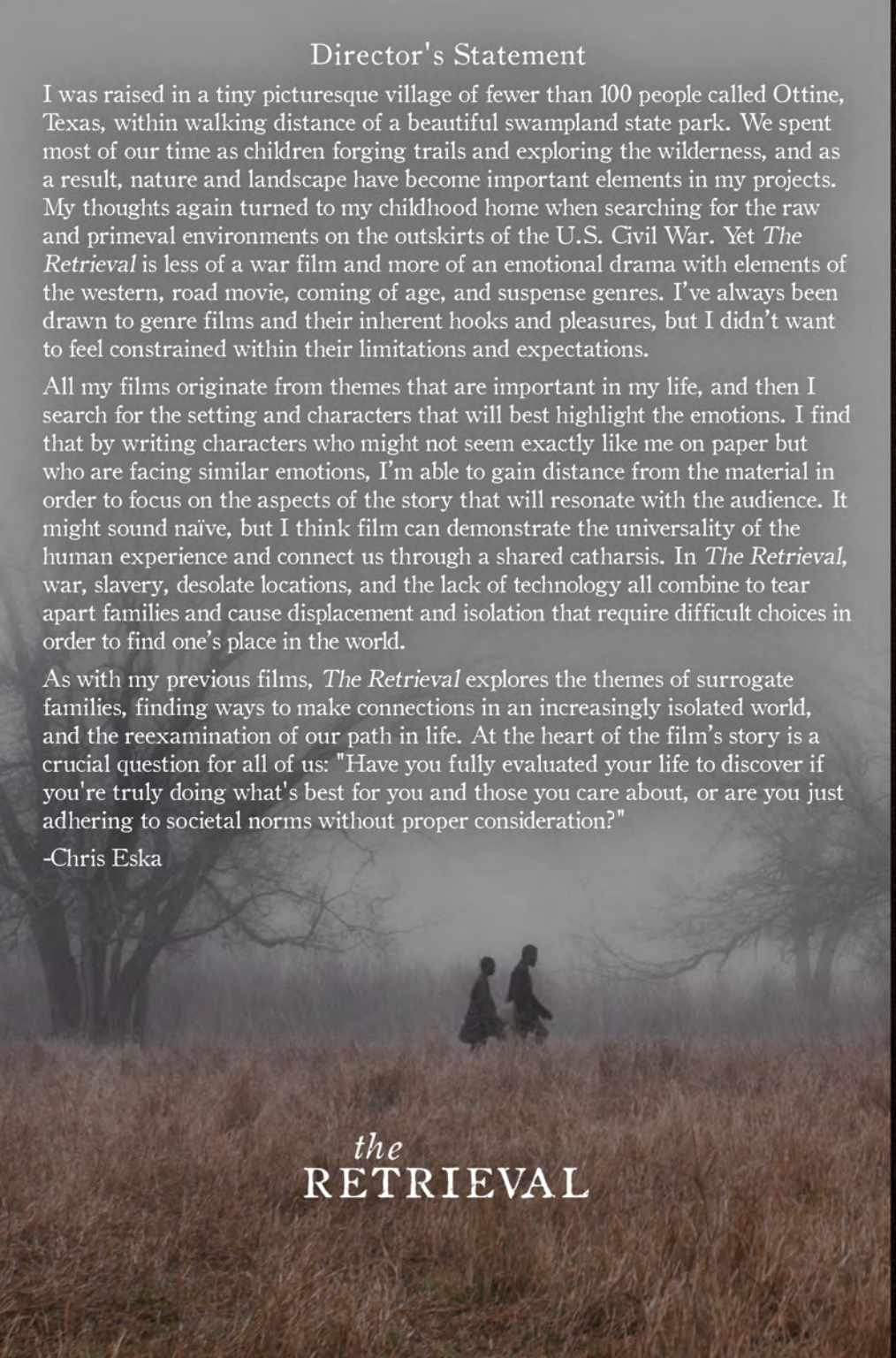
Director's Statement

I was raised in a tiny picturesque village of fewer than 100 people called Ottine, Texas, within walking distance of a beautiful swampland state park. We spent most of our time as children forging trails and exploring the wilderness, and as a result, nature and landscape have become important elements in my projects. My thoughts again turned to my childhood home when searching for the raw and primeval environments on the outskirts of the U.S. Civil War. Yet *The Retrieval* is less of a war film and more of an emotional drama with elements of the western, road movie, coming of age, and suspense genres. I've always been drawn to genre films and their inherent hooks and pleasures, but I didn't want to feel constrained within their limitations and expectations.

All my films originate from themes that are important in my life, and then I search for the setting and characters that will best highlight the emotions. I find that by writing characters who might not seem exactly like me on paper but who are facing similar emotions, I'm able to gain distance from the material in order to focus on the aspects of the story that will resonate with the audience. It might sound naïve, but I think film can demonstrate the universality of the human experience and connect us through a shared catharsis. In *The Retrieval*, war, slavery, desolate locations, and the lack of technology all combine to tear apart families and cause displacement and isolation that require difficult choices in order to find one's place in the world.

As with my previous films, *The Retrieval* explores the themes of surrogate families, finding ways to make connections in an increasingly isolated world, and the reexamination of our path in life. At the heart of the film's story is a crucial question for all of us: "Have you fully evaluated your life to discover if you're truly doing what's best for you and those you care about, or are you just adhering to societal norms without proper consideration?"

-Chris Eska



the
RETRIEVAL

Synopsis

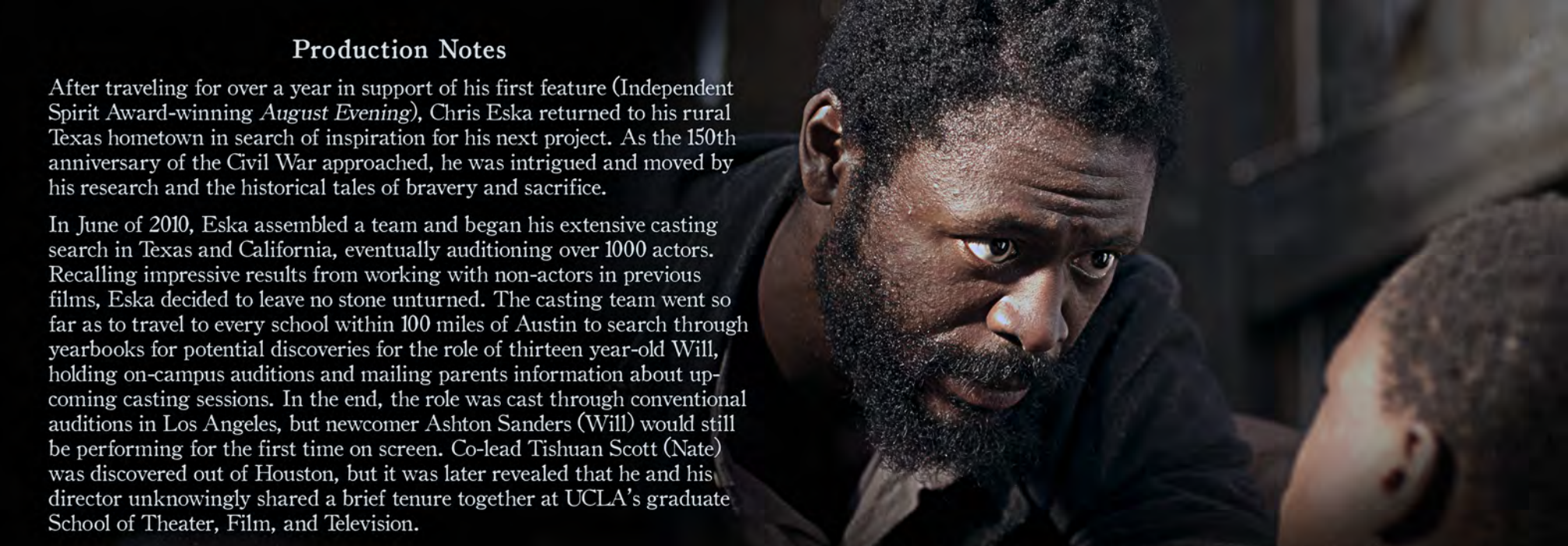
On the outskirts of the Civil War, *The Retrieval* follows a fatherless 13 year-old boy sent north by his bounty hunter gang on a dangerous mission to retrieve a wanted man under false pretense.

During their journey towards the unwitting man's reckoning, the initially distant pair develops unexpected bonds. As his feelings grow, the boy is consumed by conflicting emotions and a gut-wrenching ultimate decision: betray the father figure he's finally found or risk being killed by his gang for insubordination.

Production Notes

After traveling for over a year in support of his first feature (Independent Spirit Award-winning *August Evening*), Chris Eska returned to his rural Texas hometown in search of inspiration for his next project. As the 150th anniversary of the Civil War approached, he was intrigued and moved by his research and the historical tales of bravery and sacrifice.

In June of 2010, Eska assembled a team and began his extensive casting search in Texas and California, eventually auditioning over 1000 actors. Recalling impressive results from working with non-actors in previous films, Eska decided to leave no stone unturned. The casting team went so far as to travel to every school within 100 miles of Austin to search through yearbooks for potential discoveries for the role of thirteen year-old Will, holding on-campus auditions and mailing parents information about upcoming casting sessions. In the end, the role was cast through conventional auditions in Los Angeles, but newcomer Ashton Sanders (Will) would still be performing for the first time on screen. Co-lead Tishuan Scott (Nate) was discovered out of Houston, but it was later revealed that he and his director unknowingly shared a brief tenure together at UCLA's graduate School of Theater, Film, and Television.



Throughout 2010, the preproduction team scouted isolated Texas ranches, authentic historical sites, and remote National Forests and State Parks to depict a variety of beautiful and desolate landscapes throughout the characters' journey. By the end of the year, producers Jacob Esquivel and Jason Wehling moved down to Gonzales, Texas, to set up headquarters in a large rented Victorian house undergoing renovations. Early in 2011, cast and crew began joining what would become a homey mixture of production office and filmmaking commune—when not building historical sets, distressing costumes, or shooting tests, the cast and crew slept on air mattresses, cooked together, and played *Guitar Hero*. Working again with cinematographer Yasu Tanida, Eska concentrated on capturing the stark beauty of the Texas winter while grounding the visuals in a gritty realism. Despite the limited budget for production design and costumes, the team was able to create convincing period detail through their ingenuity and the help of Civil War re-enactors who provided realistic weaponry, uniforms, horses, extras, and more.

From summer of 2011 through summer of 2012, Eska sifted through almost 70 hours of footage to give shape to the story. He worked both in person with Austin composer Matthew Wiedemann and via internet with UK musician Jon Attwood (Yellow6) to craft a soundtrack that elicits emotion through both traditional and modern elements. As soon as a rough cut was complete, *The Retrieval* was invited to several top film festivals. The team decided to wait to premiere at the 2013 SXSW Film Festival, where lead actor Tishuan Scott received the Special Jury Prize for Best Acting.

Cast Biographies

TISHUAN SCOTT as Nate

Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, Tishuan attended Morehouse College where he earned his B.A. in Drama and Psychology. He then attended the UCLA School of Theater, Film & Television where he received his M.F.A. in Acting. Tishuan can currently be seen in Andrew Bujalski's film *Computer Chess*, and in his SXSW 2013 Special Jury Recognition for Acting performance in *The Retrieval*.

ASHTON SANDERS as Will

Ashton has performed in the theatre since the age of eight. His experience includes lead roles at the Los Angeles Theater, Nate Holden Performing Arts Center and Central Los Angeles High School of Performing Arts. Ashton continues to receive training in acting, voice and dance at Amazing Grace Conservatory and the Central Los Angeles High School of Visual & Performing Arts.

KESTON JOHN as Marcus

Keston trained at the University Of Central Florida Conservatory Theatre, where he graduated in 2006 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting. John is based in Los Angeles, where he works in the film, television, and commercial worlds – including recurring roles on *24* and *Lincoln Heights*.

BILL OBERST JR. as Burrell

Bill has amassed 96 film and TV credits including lead roles in the award- winning docudrama *Sherman's March*, The Hallmark Channel movie *The Shunning* and a multitude of independent films. In 2012, Bill's performances were recognized with a Daytime Emmy Award, a Golden Cob Award for Best Rising B-Movie Actor and the Shockfest International Film Festival's Best Actor Award.

CHRISTINE HORN as Rachel

Christine is an actress, producer, director and musician. She has performed with the Broadway and US National Touring companies of Disney's *The Lion King*, and her most recent credits include *Blood Done Sign My Name* and *Stomp the Yard*. Christine runs her own record label and production company (Chocolate Superstar Productions) and is working on her third CD and a children's cooking show.

ALFONSO FREEMAN as Isaac

Alfonso is an accomplished actor, singer, and voiceover artist and is known for his starring role in the cult film *Ten 'til Noon*. He has also starred in a number of films and TV shows, most notably, alongside his father, Morgan Freeman, and Jack Nicholson in *The Bucket List*. Alfonso is the international voice of Uncle Ben's products, and he can also be seen in a number of high profile commercials across America

Crew Biographies

CHRIS ESKA - Writer/Director/Editor

Chris was raised in the village of Ottine, Texas (pop. 98). He studied sociology and art at Rice University before attending UCLA's MFA film directing program. *Doki-Doki*, his UCLA master's thesis film, premiered on the national PBS series *Independent Lens* with an introduction by Susan Sarandon. His first feature, *August Evening*, won the $50,000 Target Filmmaker Award and was nominated for two 2008 Independent Spirit Awards, where it took home the Cassavetes Award.

JACOB ESQUIVEL - Producer

Jacob grew up in San Antonio, Texas and attended The University of Texas at Austin, earning his BS in Radio/Television/Film in 2005. Along with a few other members of *The Retrieval* crew, he worked on Eska's first feature, *August Evening*, as the film's location sound recordist. Currently based out of Los Angeles, Jacob has worked on the production side of commercials, music videos and independent features.

JASON WEHLING - Producer

Jason's producing credits include: *August Evening*, winner of the John Cassavetes Award; Alan Berg's PBS doc, *A Place to Dance*; Paul Gordon's SXSW and Venice Film Fest standout, *The Happy Poet*; Jonny Mars' ESPN feature doc, *America's Parking Lot*; Spencer Parsons' *Saturday Morning Massacre*; and Kyle Henry's anthology of shorts, *Fourplay*, parts of which played the Cannes Film Festival. From 2002–2005, he served as a programmer on PBS' *Independent Lens* series and he currently works with Austin's Arts + Labor creative community.

YASU TANIDA - Director of Photography

Yasu was named in the 2010 International Cinematographer Guild's Generation Next 5 DP's Under 35 and Variety's 2008 Top 10 Cinematographers to Watch lists. He shot two seasons of the TV series *The Wannabes Starring Savvy* for the Starz Network, and the A&E pilot *Those Who Kill* starring Chloe Sevigny, a coming of age film with director Quentin Lee, *White Frog*, and his feature starring Zoe Saldana, *The Heart Specialist*. He recently shot his second collaboration with Joe Carnahan - the NBC pilot, *The Blacklist*.

ALAN BERG - Executive Producer

An award-winning documentary filmmaker and native Texan, Alan co-founded Arts+Labor in 2004 with his wife, Kristin Johansen-Berg. His films have screened at Cannes, SXSW, and The Los Angeles Film Festival, and he's had two documentaries nationally distributed by PBS. He has won more than twenty state and national awards for his reporting and worked on the PBS Best Practices in Journalism project. Alan has also taught reporting and long-form narrative storytelling at the University of Texas.

TOM BORDERS - Executive Producer

Tom Borders received his B.A. from the University of Notre Dame and an M.A. from the University of Michigan. He was co-founder and former CEO of Borders Books Shop, Inc. He is currently President of Sixth Street Films Inc. Borders is a Director of the Bank of Ann Arbor and is on the Board of Directors of the Tapestry Foundation. He is former Chair of the Harry Ransom Center Advisory Council, and has been a member of the Council for ten years.

SIBYL AVERY JACKSON - Executive Producer

A graduate of Spelman College, Sibyl is an author, screenwriter, and a member of the WGA. She served as a researcher and editor at the LBJ Library and as a spokesperson for a large wireless service provider. There, she developed and managed government relations and corporate giving, which inspired her to write an award-winning suspense/thriller novel, *Degree of Caution*. Sibyl has secured funding for various projects and served on the board of the Houston Museum of African American Culture. She lives in Houston with her husband, Alfred.

"Eloquently insightful, distinctive filmmaking… A skillfully wrought feature with appreciable emotional and historical resonance."

—THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

WINNER SPECIAL JURY PRIZE SXSW FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER CRITICS PRIZE DEAUVILLE FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER AUDIENCE AWARD MILL VALLEY FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER AUDIENCE AWARD PHOENIX FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER AUDIENCE AWARD NEW ORLEANS FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER BEST FILM ASHLAND FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER BEST DIRECTOR PHOENIX FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER GRAND JURY PRIZE WHITE SANDS FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER BEST FILM MONTREAL BLACK FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER BEST FILM BRONZE LENS FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER BEST FILM TWIN CITIES BLACK FILM FESTIVAL 2013

WINNER BEST FILM SANTA CRUZ FILM FESTIVAL 2013

"Equal parts suspenseful road movie, persuasively detailed period drama and emotionally resonant coming-of-age story, 'The Retrieval' is an outstanding example of indie filmmaking accomplished with limited resources and an abundance of skill."

—VARIETY

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