

“SAFE WORD” EXPLORES VULNERABILITY IN FILM

WORDS BY AVIVA BECHKY



Jonathan Adriel felt terrified to audition for “Safe Word.” “I was like, ‘Me, masculine?’” the performer says. “‘No singing, no dancing?’ But I [knew] this was a feat that had to be tackled.”

By the time he finished performing as Bear in the 15-minute short film, Adriel says he’d fallen in love with acting all over again.

“Safe Word” follows the relationship between Bear and Cesar (Mauricio Pita). Bear begins as Cesar’s dom, humiliating him on a regular basis. But when Bear pushes for a change in their relationship, the two wrestle to find a new dynamic.

The D.C.-made film debuted at GALA Hispanic Theatre on November 16. Pita — who is the executive producer, in addition to playing Cesar — first started planning “Safe Word” last winter, channeling his own experiences.

“I’ve been struggling a lot with negative self-talk,” Pita says. “I have this voice in my head that shuts down whatever idea I have or anything I dream about. So, I started going to therapy to figure out where those voices came from.”

But after his therapy sessions, Pita didn’t feel amazing or transformed. Instead, internal conflicts bubbled to the surface. Pita poured those conflicts into “Safe Word.”

He initially struggled to play Cesar, he says. Pita ended up using his vulnerabilities and letting his own negative self-talk show through to access Cesar’s headspace.

“I allowed myself to go to the dark place I’ve been working so hard not to get back into,” Pita says. “And we ended up using that. That was the take.”

Together, Pita and Adriel sharpened the conflict between Cesar and Bear. The creative team developed layers of

symbolism: an orange, slowly unpeeled as the characters let down their guards. A solar dancing flower, waving more and more as Cesar and Bear create emotional momentum.

Portraying Bear, Adriel learned to imbue the same repeated line — “Look at me” — with tones ranging from sternness to tenderness. He found artistry in the relationship between his character and Pita’s, especially in the process of Bear tying Cesar up.

“It’s very intimate,” Adriel says. “It’s not what society has deemed it out to be. It’s a very beautiful song and dance.”

With its themes of self-loathing and self-love, co-writer and director Christopher Cunetto says “Safe Word” was sometimes difficult to film. Some crew members stepped out briefly after vulnerable takes. The actors created real emotions in the moment, Cunetto says.

Directing the film helped Cunetto better understand the complexity of his own feelings in moments that are complicated and fraught, upsetting and joyful all at once. He hopes the film’s audience shares in that realization.

“Watching the film, I want people to feel a little braver or safer to be messy and vulnerable and choose the uncertain space,” Cunetto says.

Find updates about the viewing schedule of “Safe Word” at safeword.film. Adriel, Cunetto and Pita can all be found on Instagram: Adriel @justjonathanadriel, Cunetto @cunetto and Pita @mauriciopita.

Follow Tepui Media, the D.C.-based producers of the film, @tepuimedia.