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Photo: Monica Chang

Hip Hop Artist Raphael Xavier Wins Grant to Produce Short Film

by Darcy Grabenstein

Philadelphia-based hip hop artist [Raphael Xavier](#) has received a \$25,000 grant from the [Independence Public Media Foundation](#) (IPMF) to produce *One Way*, a narrative short film. Speaking with me about his film, Xavier cautions that those expecting a dance film are in for a surprise; the film is about Eli, a 17-year old Black boy navigating his identity at the intersection of street life, bike culture, and a family conflict with deep roots.

While the film focuses on the BMX bike scene, Xavier noted many similarities between biking and dancing. “Stop lights are like the boom lights in the wings. Riding is like choreography, improv.” He said they are both demanding, like any sport or art, with constant practice and training required to improve performance.

An award-winning artist and a professional breaker/dancer for 20 years, Xavier has worked in a variety of fields including music, photography, and film. He teaches “History of Hip Hop Dance” along with culture and introductory breaking courses at Princeton University and the University of Texas – Austin. His grant is one of several IPMF grants totaling \$1.3 million awarded to local filmmakers, festivals, and film organizations, with an emphasis on supporting artists from underrepresented communities, and films with a commitment to social justice.

When his [Sassafrazz](#) dance tour was canceled in March due to COVID-19, Xavier turned his talents to screenwriting. He also spent more time riding his BMX bike, a hobby he has enjoyed since he was 12, the same age he took up dancing. Since the pandemic, Xavier said he has crashed twice and “it scared me.” In his younger days, he routinely bruised his calves, smashed his shins, and sprained his wrists while riding. These days, he said, “I know what I can do without pushing too far and getting hurt.”

One Way is loosely based on Xavier's own experience as a BMX bike rider. The film's main character, Eli, was inspired by and named after a 19-year-old Black man Xavier befriended while riding on Philly streets. When Xavier found out that Eli was homeless, sleeping in train stations or tunnels, he invited him to stay at his house.

Just as fortuitous as meeting Eli, the opportunity to apply for the IPMF grant fell into Xavier's lap. In August, he mentioned to a friend and fellow artist that he was working on the script. Another two months passed before they met in person and the colleague asked him to send her the script. A month later, unaware that the grant even existed, he received an email that he was a grant recipient. Xavier expressed his gratitude for the grant; "I'm officially a filmmaker."

One Way originally was conceived as a feature film, with a 107-page script. Xavier has whittled the script down to 45 pages for the grant-funded production. However, he plans on raising funds to produce the feature-length film as well. He said he will consider all options, including corporate sponsorship from a BMX-related business.

For the short version, Xavier is looking for actors, a film crew, and casting director. "I need the whole shebang," he said. Philly-based Gary Dourdan has expressed an interest in directing the film, as he and Xavier have performed together. Xavier said Philly biker Mike Plasha will play a main character, and he also would like Eddie Griffin to play one of the other five main characters. He will soon put out a call for bikers as extras, and expects responses from 100 to 300 riders.

No newcomer to short films, Xavier [collaborated](#) as a performer in 2020 with Philly-based choreographer Roni Koresh on "The Elephant Is in the Room," described as "a visceral response to our troubled America, hate crimes, and our cry for change." A multidisciplinary artist, rapper Xavier also cut a record in 2020, *Black Duke*. As the [music video](#) of his single *Do the Math* shows, this delves into the BMX bike culture and also shows off a few of Xavier's break moves.

Xavier received the perfect gift for his birthday; on Dec. 7, breaking was confirmed as one of four additional sports approved for the 2024 Paris Olympics. While BMX racing has been part of the Olympics since 2008, BMX freestyle also was scheduled to make its Olympic debut in the July Games, postponed until 2024.

The debut Xavier most eagerly awaits, however, is that of *One Way*, representing a change in direction—and newfound recognition—for him as an artist.

Independence Public Media Foundation [news release](#)

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