

Chandler Woman Writes Holiday Film Starring Ashanti

Written by David M. Brown

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Ashanti and Melissa Bustamante

Mesa native Melissa Bustamante lives part time in Chandler today, and her film, "A Christmas Winter Song" will live in prime time this holiday season. Tune in.

A graduate of Mesa's Booker T. Washington Elementary School, Rhodes Junior High School and Dobson High School, Bustamante wrote the script for the movie, which stars Grammy Award-winning singer Ashanti and co-stars Stan Shaw and Sashani Nicole.

Directed by Camille Brown, who has become a friend, the prime-time show airs on Lifetime Dec. 19, 6 p.m. and 10 p.m., all MST. After this, it will be available streaming (mylifetime.com).

In early 2019, Brown pitched the script to MarVista Entertainment, which produced the film on spec in May and promptly sold it to the network in October. Filming for "A Christmas Winter Song" took her to Brighton, Michigan, for about five weeks.

Ashanti plays Clio (the Greek muse of history), a shop owner who befriends Fred (Stan Shaw), a homeless jazz singer. They bond over music, and Clio, having just lost her father, helps Fred reconnect with his daughter (Sashani Nicole) for Christmas.

"I wasn't expecting to have any 'name' actors attached to it, so when I heard that both Ashanti and Stan Shaw had signed on, I couldn't believe it," Bustamante said. "It was a surreal experience to hear the words that had been in my head for so long come out of the mouths of such talented actors. I was so happy to see the characters come to life. I'm so pleased with the whole cast!"

Her time in Mesa set the musical foundation for the film. "My junior high and high school had stellar theater and choir departments, and the Christmas concert was one of my favorite events of the year at both," she recalled. "I knew when writing the script that I wanted music to be what brought the two characters together, and a Christmas concert was the perfect way to do that."

One inspiration for her performing arts interests was Steve Wilson, a teacher at Rhodes Junior High School from 1987 to 2001. He mentored her on the stage and in the theater classroom. "The experiences I had in his classes and productions are a major reason why I chose a path in the arts," she said.

"She was an exceptional actress and singer and one of the hardest working kids I have ever worked with," he recalled, noting that when she was in the ninth grade she was Sandy in the school's production of "Grease." In his 32nd year of teaching, he is a theater instructor and director at Fond du Lac High School in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

Later, at Dobson High School, she was the lead, Maria, in "West Side Story," chosen as much for talent and that she was the only Latina in the Drama Department, she joked.

After graduating, she moved to California and waited tables in Malibu, serving hungry stars such as Pamela Anderson and Pauly Shore. She also worked at a day spa before entering Cal State Northridge, where she also worked at a high-end Beverly Hills department store. Her experiences there gave her an idea for a television show, and that effort eventually became the story for the film.

The family is and has been supportive of her writing.

"I have learned so much from my husband, Bud, about this business. He has been my cheerleader every step of the way. They live part time in

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Los Angeles where he's a Steadicam operator and a director. One of her step-sisters, Renee Lara, lives in Chandler; the other, Loretta Nevarez, is in Prescott.

Her large Mexican-American family has many members in the arts. "My aunt and uncle have incredible singing voices, and several of my cousins are dancers," she said. "Growing up, we were the family who would sing around the piano on Christmas Eve. Those memories were with me when I was writing this film."

"I'm very proud of Melissa. She is not only a talented and dedicated writer but she is also a very genuine and caring person. Any mother would be honored to have her as their daughter," said her mother, Mesa resident Sheri Nevarez.

She recalled that Melissa has always been interested in the creative arts and started writing during college. "She came across so many interesting people in California that she started to develop ideas for screen plays."

Melissa was always encouraged "to do whatever made her happy and to never give up on her dreams."

Her brother, Matthew Bustamante, an associate broker with Realty One Group Commercial in Chandler, added, "I am the proudest big brother in the world. She has worked extremely hard for many years and deserves the fame she has received from the production of 'Winter Song.' "She is living her dream every day."

For a trailer, see [youtube.com/watch?v=wEjLPm0QHBc&feature=emb_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEjLPm0QHBc&feature=emb_title). Brown is a Valley-based writer (azwriter.com).