

The AFI FEST Interview: Director Mike Ott on CALIFORNIA DREAMS

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Mike Ott is a four-time AFI FEST alumnus with his feature films LITTLEROCK (AFI FEST 2010), PEARBLOSSOM HWY (AFI FEST 2012) and ACTOR MARTINEZ (AFI FEST 2016), and the short film). We caught up with Ott to talk about his latest feature, t had its world premiere at the 2017 Berlin Criticsâ?? Week and will at SXSW in March. (Watch a clip below.)



Mike Ott

In the film, Ott presents five unique individuals in pursuit of a big life change. Through auditions set up in small towns across Southern California, the film shows genuine characters with big Hollywood aspirations who, for various reasons, have never had the opportunity to pursue their dreams.

AFI: What made you want to take a documentary approach to this quintessential story of making it big in Hollywood?

MO: The more films I make, the more my work leans toward incorporating documentary into fiction. The purely fictional story of making it in Hollywood has been done so many times and much better than I could ever do it. And not to say that docs on Hollywood havenâ??t been done to death too, but the approach we took with this film somehow gave us a bit of a strange, fresh look into a story thatâ??s been told before. At least, thatâ??s my hope.

AFI: This film centers around Cory Zacharia, who has been a staple of your films since LITTLEROCK. What is it about Cory that keeps bringing you back to him as both a character and subject?

MO: I remember one of my professors in grad school talking about casting and he said something to the degree of, â??Casting is like if you had to spend all evening at a party watching someone. Whoâ??s the person at the party youâ??d want to listen to talk, or watch interact with others, or eat a sandwich, etc.?â?• For me, itâ??s Cory. He has such unique and earnest reactions to his experiences in the world. Itâ??s just something I find so refreshing when the rest of actors (and most of humanity) are trying to be complicated and ironic. Itâ??s nice to explore ideas with someone who has no sense of sarcasm or irony; only pure love and joy for life, along with a point of view that is sometimes so foreign. The truth is, Cory is still such an enigma to me. Every film Iâ??ve made was in some way to get to understand him more and how his mind works. I donâ??t know if Iâ??ll ever quite figure him out, but making these films has been a big part of the journey for me.

AFI: How did you find your other subjects for CALIFORNIA DREAMS, as they all have such varied and interesting stories?

MO: I had read an article years ago about famous people and what their favorite film was and I saw that Trumpâ??s favorite film was CITIZEN KANE, and I remember thinking how fitting that was. For some reason, it got me thinking about the link between who you are as a person and what kind of art youâ??re attracted to and what that says about your secret (or not-so-secret) self.

We put up flyers at local dive bars and grocery stores in my hometown and posted on non-casting websites to find people to audition, and the audition was for the person to come in and do a monologue of their choice from one of their favorite films. After each monologue, Iâ??d interview them about the reading and try to find out how the monologue, or the film or the character they picked, related to their life.

But we didnâ??t want a bunch of out-of-work actors to come in and audition. We wanted to find genuine characters who didnâ??t live in Hollywood but who had always wanted the opportunity to be part of it.

AFI: This film is exploring some ideas set forth in your previous films, specifically the struggle with the American dream in small town U.S.A. What is it about that landscape and community that keeps bringing you back to tell these stories?

MO: Maybe because I grew up in a pretty small town and these little struggles we have in life are the ones that I find speak to the human condition in such an illuminating way â?? small things like wanting to go on a first date, move out of your parents house or even just leave the state on vacation for the first

time ever. Those are the moments I like to explore and they remind me of what Richard Linklater said about DAZED AND CONFUSED: â??Maybe the stakes in the film seem pretty low, but when itâ??s your life, theyâ??re actually very high.â?• These are the same kind of characters I want to be surrounded by in my real life. I want to hang out with the weird kid from Bakersfield who works at Arbyâ??s and who canâ??t make it to Hollywood or who canâ??t find love but has always dreamed of it, not the cool dude from Encino whoâ??s mildly famous and hanging out at Soho House. Thatâ??s why AMERICAN MOVIE is one of my favorite films â?? and also why we have Mark Borchardt do a cameo in the movie as an homage to the film that inspired pretty much everything I make â?? outsiders who canâ??t or wonâ??t ever quite fit into the mainstream.

AFI: This is your sixth film and you have been lucky enough to screen your work at festivals all over the world. How have you been able to master navigating the film festival world? Do you have any advice for other filmmakers who are having their first festival experiences?

MO: Iâ??ve been very lucky in that regard, but a lot of that came from my experience with my first film ANALOG DAYS. While traveling with that film, I was worried that I had to make a certain kind of film next, and found myself trying to think about ideas that I wasnâ??t that attracted to but thought were â??right thing to do for my career.â?• But the more I traveled with ANALOG DAYS and met filmmakers from all over the world, I found the people I looked up to or connected with werenâ??t the people with latest hit like NAPOLEON DYNAMITE-type hit film, but instead were the artists who were purely following their interests and making weird shit that no one else could make but them. And that was a very important moment for me, to learn that itâ??s okay to follow your interests and to be okay with the fact that your interests arenâ??t always going to be whatâ??s most popular. And thatâ??s why I ended up making almost four films in a row with Cory. I was like, this is who I want to see in films, this is who I find interesting, and if you want to watch it then great, and if not, then thatâ??s fine too.

My advice for filmmakers having their first festival experience is to just enjoy the moment; getting to show your film to an audience is such an amazing experience. Unfortunately I think a lot of people go to festivals with other agendas thinking they have to network, and end up talking about themselves incessantly or walking around pitching themselves and their projects like some robot. Personally that makes my skin crawl, but to each his own. Iâ??d say if youâ??re really interested in meeting people and making meaningful connections, you shouldnâ??t talk about films at all (especially your own). Thatâ??s how you know youâ??ve made a real friend on that festival circuit â?? when you can talk about anything and everything but film.

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