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AFI DOCS INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR YU GU ON A WOMANâ??S WORK: THE NFLâ??S CHEERLEADER PROBLEM

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

In 2017, the National Football League earned over $14 billion in revenue. NFL cheerleaders, however, earn less than minimum wageâ??some paid as low as $1.50 an hour. A WOMANâ??S WORK highlights this astounding wage discrepancy through the stories of three women fighting back for what they deserve.

After dedicating years to training and paying out-of-pocket for expenses, the women risk their careers by leading a historic class-action lawsuit against the NFL, alleging gendered wage theft and egregious labor practices. As the women share their personal and professional struggles, A WOMANâ??S WORK illustrates the everyday challenges and exploitation working women continue to face today.



Director Yu Gu

Yu Gu is an LA-based filmmaker born in China and raised in Canada. She works in narrative and documentary film. Her first feature WHO IS ARTHUR CHU? premiered at Slamdance and was broadcast on America Reframed. Her work is supported by the Sundance Institute, ITVS, TFI, Firelight Media and Film Independent.

A WOMANâ??S WORK: THE NFLâ??S CHEERLEADER PROBLEM plays as part of the Truth and Justice program at AFI DOCS at the AFI Silver Theatre in Silver Spring, MD on Thursday, June 20 and at the Landmark E Street Cinema in Washington DC on Friday, June 21. Buy tickets to the screening here.

AFI spoke with her about the film before its AFI DOCS premiere.

AFI: What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

My biggest inspiration is my family. Since I was a child, my parents and my grandparents always told stories about their experiences living through the Communist revolution, the Cultural Revolution, surviving labor camps and standing up for freedom of expression. They never sugarcoated anything. My familyâ??s emotional honesty taught me that our stories, our dreams, our fears, our memories matter. Theyâ??re beautiful and worthy, even if there are those who seek to erase them. As a teenager and young adult, I filmed my family in China every chance I got. Since then, filmmaking has become my way to understand the world around me, to connect with people and myself. Because I am a foreigner

both in my birthplace and in my chosen home, I need to make my own truths, and filmmaking helps me to envision a place where I belong. What inspires me to keep on being a filmmaker is seeing my dad who is a visual artist. Heâ??s sacrificed a lot for his art and always describes his work as a practice. I see my filmmaking too as a lifelong practice.



AFI: How did you become interested in this story? What inspired you to tell it?

All my life Iâ??ve felt like an outsider, as a girl and only child in China, as an Asian woman in the west. When I came to the United States as a graduate student, I fell in love with American football. It was marvelous to me that every Sunday, millions of people from all ethnic and economic backgrounds come together to watch this game that champions hard work, resilience and competition â?? all principles of the American dream. The cheerleaders on the field are the most visible, most celebrated and glamorized women in this manâ??s world. When Lacy first filed her lawsuit alleging that she was paid less than minimum wage in 2014, I suddenly saw so many parallels with my own experience of being devalued. Asian Americans in the United States have been trapped by the model minority myth. You will be accepted and rewarded only if you agree to blindly toe the line. The cheerleaders were told that this is not a job; itâ??s a privilege to dance on the field, to be seen as this cultural and sexual icon. I was fascinated that Lacy and the other women rebelled and became outsiders for the first time in their lives, something I knew a lot about. How will they rebuild themselves? How will they change and grow through this fight?

AFI: How did you find and connect with the subjects in your film?

I first contacted Lacyâ??s attorneys, Leslie, Sharon and Darci of LVBH, an all-female law firm based in Oakland, CA, who specialized in employment law and only represented workers. I drove up from LA to Oakland and met with the attorneys and Lacy. We connected immediately. I explained to Lacy that I wanted to make a long-term film, to document her journey in the lawsuit as well as her personal life. She said yes, and I began to film with her.

After bringing on producing partner and writer Elizabeth Ai, we contacted the attorneys for all the other four lawsuits that popped up across the country after Lacy, including Sean Cooney, who represents Maria in Buffalo, NY. We flew over there and met with them, explained our goal and also began the four-year journey of filming with Maria and her lawsuit.

AFI: What was a particular obstacle you faced while making the film?

This film has been extremely difficult. Itâ??s so personal to me, and yet on the surface so foreign in the sense that Iâ??m the one whoâ??s foreign. I was shocked by the amount of stereotypes and prejudices I encountered both against my characters who are former cheerleaders, and against myself â?? an Asian American woman filmmaker. During one of the first interviews we conducted with a six-year veteran cheerleader, her husband sat down my producer Elizabeth and I and told us point blank, â??If these women want money to dance half-naked on the field then theyâ??re whores.â?• As we continued to apply for funding, we found it difficult to reach funders who were primarily liberal middle to upper class. Ironically, some also dismissed the women in our film because to them, these women chose to objectify themselves and in a way â??asked for itâ?•. Though it wasnâ??t necessarily spoken out loud, funders questioned my ability and perspective as a filmmaker to tackle such a mainstream subject â?? how dare you conflate womenâ??s rights, labor rights, with Americaâ??s favorite pastime? The holy altar of sports shouldnâ??t be tainted, especially not by you.

Because of all this noise around me, it was hard for me to focus on my vision, on how I wanted to tell this story, and to believe that my perspective matters. For women of color, we already carry so much generational trauma in our bodies, as well as the brunt of everyday micro-aggressions. Over the five years of making this film, with the help of mentors, my team and great filmmaker organizations, I learned the discipline of focus. I focused on the affirmations, on digging deeper within myself, on my relationship with the women I was following, to channel my anger and doubt into my passion for making this film. Iâ??m proud of myself and my team.

AFI: What do you want audiences to walk away with after screening your film?

I want to audiences to reflect on themselves. Do you value womenâ??s work? Why or why not? If you think of yourself as a feminist, are there still biases within yourself that separate you from other women? Women, are you perpetuating the same toxic power dynamics and cultural norms of the patriarchy that hurt you? Irrespective of political allegiances, what are your values when it comes to gender equality and how can you better live those values? Collective identity is important, but does that collective serve to uplift all its members? I want people to understand that in order to change a system that hurts us all, we have to act collectively.

AFI: Why is Washington, DC a valuable location to screen your film?

Washington, DC, is the seat of political power in the United States and itâ??s also a symbol of Americaâ??s power to the world. Documentary films like ours and others that screen at the festival pose as a force that questions, subverts, engages in critical dialogue with this established, white male power, in order to create different ways of thinking and relating to each other. As our main character Lacy said in an interview, this is not just a cheerleader problem, itâ??s a woman problem. Itâ??s important for national lawmakers and decision makers to understand this.

AFI: Why are documentary films important today?

Documentaries not only witness reality unfolding in our everyday life, they also are able to reimagine reality. The era of feigned objectivity is long gone. We as documentary filmmakers today are able to filter, fragment and reconstruct the world around us in order to tell a larger truth that embodies both the worlds of the people we document as well as our own internal world of unique perspective and experience. This enriched filmmaking is why weâ??re experiencing a golden age of documentary today. In a time of polarization, extremism and the echo chamber of the internet, documentary film is more important than ever to pull us out of our enclosures and into new worlds we all share.

Buy tickets to A WOMANâ??S WORK: THE NFLâ??S CHEERLEADER PROBLEM here.



(Sourced from AFI.com blog)

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