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HollywoodGlee Speaks with INVISIBLE VALLEY filmmakers Aaron Maurer and Zachary McMillan

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

This yearâ??s Santa Barbara International Film Festival presented by UGG, will open on March 31, 2021, with *Invisible Valley,* showcasing the work of Director Aaron Maurer and Producer Zachary McMillan.

Invisible Valley is set in the Coachella Valley: world-renowned for its extravagant golf resorts, unmatched winter weather, and A-list celebrity music festivals, projecting an image of money, class, and fame. From its earliest days as a health resort and continuing through a century of rapid growth and expansion, the Valley has retained its richly earned status as one of the leading winter playgrounds in the U.S., and the most desirable golfing destinations in the world. A prime affluent-tourist magnet demands caviar standards of taste and excellence and the Coachella Valley delivers.

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Yet this outward image of luxury and leisure masks another reality. Field workers â?? many of them undocumented â?? constitute a large part of the Valleyâ??s population. Living outside the gates of success, these immigrants bear the burden of harvesting a large amount of our countryâ??s food source. Second and third jobs are common, and when the vacationing season ends and the crops have been harvested, most families must uproot their children, and travel north for the next seasonâ??s harvest. Many workers sleep in their trucks or in the fields, while others struggle to ensure housing for their families. The disruption to the stability of these families has resulted in poverty and puts the children into a category of risk across the board.



Invisible Valley weaves together the disparate stories of undocumented farmworkers, wealthy snowbirds, and music festival-goers over the course of a year in Californiaâ??s Coachella Valley. In exploring the history as well its imperiled future, the film uncovers an imminent environmental and social crisis and the looming consequences for the people who call it home.



What follows is a question and answer (Q&A) session by film critic Larry Gleeson **(â??LGâ?•)** with Director Aaron Maurer **(â??AMâ?•)** and Producer Zachary McMillan **(â??ZMâ?•)** on the film, the actors, the filmmakersâ?? sensibilities on making the film, and the impactful discoveries they made extending across the State of California and into the County of Santa Barbara.

Q & A with Director Aaron Maurer and Producer Zachary McMillan

LG: What initially sparked the idea for this story?

AM: I first got involved when Zach approached me with an initial idea; letâ??s look at the residents of the Coachella Valley as â??migrantsâ?? traveling in and out through the seasons. The word â??Migrantâ?? has taken on such a loaded meaning over the last few years especially, that simple reframing of the word was a really interesting place to start from and generated a lot of ideas and questions. I knew right away there was something worth digging deeper into. From that launching point, we were able to weave a lot of ideas together and find stories in the Valley that added a sense of humanity and emotion to the conceptual ideas.

LG: Why did you decide to focus the story around the Coachella Valley and the migrant underclass?

ZM: Aaron and I both grew up in the Midwest, in Minneapolis, which is known for its winters and is the habitat of quite a few Snowbirds â?? people who head to warmer climates during the coldest months. My mother-in-law, Mary Ingebrand-Pohlad, is one such Snowbird and has been going to the Palm Springs area for the greater part of her adult life. However, about a decade ago she read an advertisement on her church bulletin for a program called Read With Me in Palm Desert. She then volunteered in this literacy advocacy program and was amazed by how many students in the Valley came from migrant farm working families. Suddenly her eyes opened to a new world: one that had almost literally existed across the street from her own community. As she became more involved with the schools and became closer to the students and the teachers, she increasingly felt the desire to make a bigger impact, and eventually, this led her to think that a documentary could be the best medium to show the other side of a place that is world-renowned for its golf courses and music festivals. After she talked to me about this idea, I went exploring around the Valley, driving out to the unincorporated town of Mecca trying to meet people, talk to people and realized there was something fascinating, and fascinatingly complex, about the relationships that exist in that areaâ?¦ of course things change a bit when you bring cameras around. But we were lucky enough to meet incredible people who welcomed us into their lives, into their homes. Itâ??s still almost staggering that they did this.

LG: How much research and preparation did you do before starting?

AM: This was our first documentary and it really was a trial by fire. We had no script, no outline even, it was just a matter of spending time in the communities of the Valley and getting as much footage as we could. There was little planning you could do in advance because you are working with migrant families who are living on the move and below the poverty line, they donâ??t always access to phone or internet. So, we needed to be there meeting people and making connections. Gradually ideas started to form around how this mosaic of people and themes could fit together.

LG: What most surprised you about the Coachella Valley and those featured in *Invisible Valley*?

ZM: The Coachella Valley is an extreme place, and yet the most surprising thing for me was the day-to-day reality of those extremes. In the grocery store, when you think about how the food, how the produce and the vegetables actually arrived there in front of you, it is possible to imagine the fields, the labor, the picking, and the packaging that goes into it. It is possible but it is completely abstract. Spending time with families that actually do this work, waking up at four in the morning, getting to the bell pepper fields before sunrise, and working into the heat that gets up to 110, 120 degrees Fahrenheit, is surprising. It is surprising when, after that day of work, they would invite us home, make

dinner, welcome us like family.



LG: What was a particular challenge you faced while making the film?

AM: The places where we received the most pushback were certainly from the farm owners. Some of the key imagery in the film is of the harvests and we didnâ??t get any footage of that until after a year of filming. There was a constant fear that we were coming to expose something, although that wasnâ??t our angle, there just wasnâ??t any trust there or interest in â??helpingâ??. Eventually, we made connections to some smaller farms that allowed us in and Iâ??m so grateful we got to capture a bit of the reality of that work.

Why are documentary films so vitally important in todayâ??s world?

ZM: Documentary as a genre is becoming more and more popular, and in turn more and more documentaries are going to be made. As a form, filmmakers will continue pushing what documentary â??isâ?• and what it can mean â?? pushing against what it means to be a nonfiction film â?? and this is an exciting time for any art form. I donâ??t know if documentary is specifically more important in todayâ??s world than any other dayâ??s world, but certainly with the heightened attention on it, substantive, thoughtful, challenging, expansive, or otherwise good documentaries are more important

than ever

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

ZM: It really took time and patience, and then more time. As complete outsiders to the East side of the Valley, we needed to just kind of hang around enough, for long enough, to alert people that we were more than tourists. We needed to meet people, engage with people, and earn peopleâ??s trust. One person might introduce us to another person, and then that would lead to another person, but almost all of this wouldnâ??t be filmed. Over time, we became friends, real friends, with people that lived and worked in the area, and that is when people began to open up a bit: by people vouching for us, lending us their credit. The school teachers Sky and Jose Gijon, Hernan Quintas, who became our field producer, were instrumental. And it wasnâ??t until we met Angelica Ortiz-Cichocki, our (brilliant and sensitive and nuanced) translator and language consultant, that the interviews really started to feel like a connection.

LG: What challenges did you experience filming in private community settings in an area that values privacy?

AM: Iâ??d say that most people were hesitant, at best, to be on camera. Between undocumented workers and extremely wealthy folks in the resorts, we had a lot of initial pushback. It took time to gain trust and it usually took a connection of some kind that weâ??d formed through meeting people along the way. The farmworkers and folks in the East valley, although hesitant at first, were very quick to warm up once they realized we were honestly interested in hearing their stories. By the end of the day, weâ??d be treated like an extended member of the family. That certainly wasnâ??t the case when filming at the resorts. Thereâ??s so many security, privacy issues, thereâ??s a fear there that we were there to exploit something. And it was actually the opposite. One of our main goals was to not vilify anyone in the film, itâ??s easy to make rich people look bad if youâ??re contrasting them with poverty, but itâ??s a cheap shot. Itâ??s not reflective of the real issues.

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LG: What do you want viewers to learn from seeing your film?

AM: I hope people will be inspired to think differently about the communities around them they see as â?•otherâ?•. Itâ??s very easy for us to live in our own bubbles, social media and quarantine can amplify those echo chambers, but can also be tools for understanding our neighbors if used with the right intention. As human beings, we all have blinders on some of the time, how else could we get through the day? But itâ??s important to know theyâ??re on and take them off every once in a while. Although sometimes it may not seem like it, weâ??re all on this journey together.

LG: What reaction to the film do you expect at SBIFF?

ZM: There are so many parallels between the Coachella Valley and Santa Barbara and the neighboring areas. Almost all the people we spoke with moved up to more central or northern California as the seasons and the harvests changed. I expect people will see something very familiar in the film, but hopefully, it will spark conversations that come from seeing something from a different angle, in a different light, at a slant.

LG: What does it feel like to bring the film to SBIFF?

AM: Itâ??s really exciting to open SBIFF, this project has been many years in the making so weâ??re thrilled to be able to start sharing it with audiences and believe Invisible Valley will really resonate with the community in Santa Barbara.



The 36th Santa Barbara International Film Festival, presented by UGG, will take place March 31st through April 10th, 2021, online and at two free ocean-front drive-in theatres. More information, festival passes, and tickets are available at www.sbiff.org.

Until next time, I look forward to seeing you at the drive-in!



Larry Gleeson at the Hollywood Drive-in Cinema in the heart of Hollywood, Calif., for the special scre

(*Photos and intro material courtesy of Linda Brown, Indie-PR)

Category

1. #SBIFF
2. Santa Barbara International Film Festival
3. television

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