

Icebox: The US government locks up children

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11 December 2018

Icebox, a film about young asylum seekers locked up by US authorities, is available for free streaming by nonsubscribers at HBO starting Monday, Dec. 10: <https://www.hbo.com/movies/icebox>. We reviewed the film and interviewed the director and actors at the Toronto film festival in September.

Directed by Daniel Sawka and produced by veteran American writer-director-producer James L. Brooks (best known for his extensive work in television spanning four decades), *Icebox* focuses on a 12-year-old Honduran boy, Oscar (Anthony Gonzalez), forced by gang activity to flee his home country and head for the US, where an uncle lives.

The trip north in a truck is frightening enough, organized by thugs who, at one point, pick out the women they think attractive enough to work as prostitutes. In the desert, the group of immigrants climb a border fence and ride off across the desert on bicycles provided by the smugglers. Oscar has a problem with his bike, and finds himself alone in the wasteland.

A sinister US border patrol drone, hovering in the sky like a bird of prey, spots Oscar and agents take him into custody. He ends up in a detention center, better known as the icebox. Here, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, children are locked up in cages. They shiver at night under plastic “space blankets.”

Oscar repeatedly attempts to telephone his uncle, without initial success. Other young detainees pour cold water on his illusions about being able to stay in the US: “They’ll send you back.” “Would they build places like this if they wanted us to stay?” “There is no asylum. They’re sending us all back.”

Oscar meets a female journalist (Genesis Rodriguez), and prevails upon her to contact his uncle for him. The latter, Manuel (the talented Omar Leyva), finally comes for Oscar. Manuel is in the US on a temporary visa and has hesitated to help Oscar because of fears about his own precarious situation. Picking up Oscar at the detention center, he mutters, “Never been so scared in my life.”

At the farm near Phoenix, Arizona where Manuel works in the fields, he and Oscar fill out forms and prepare for a hearing before an immigration judge. They have no legal counsel to assist them. Nonetheless, they persevere in the face of the bureaucratic red tape.

Oscar dresses up for his hearing. The judge (Forrest Fyre), perfectly civil and polite but without any comprehension of or perhaps interest in the violent, dangerous conditions in Honduras, asks Oscar whether he was forced to join the gang in question. In his ruling, the judge notes that gang violence is “prevalent” in Honduras, and we “can’t give you asylum.”

Manuel now faces a moral dilemma. He has vouched for Oscar. If he aids his nephew to go underground in the US, what will happen to his own chances of staying in the country? “If I let you run, I’ll lose everything!” On the other hand, if he helps send Oscar back to Honduras, will he be responsible for what happens to the boy?

Daniel Sawka’s film is sincere and intelligently done. Preparatory work on *Icebox* was begun under the Obama administration, which deported hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants. Donald Trump has made vicious, venomous attacks on immigrants a centerpiece of his government’s right-wing policies.

Border Angels, a migrant rights group, estimates that 10,000 men, women and children have died since 1994 attempting to cross the increasingly militarized US-Mexico border. *Icebox* bends over backward to portray the circumstances in the detention center in the most impartial manner and clearly has no wish to condemn either ICE or the border patrol as an institution. One suspects the everyday conditions are considerably worse than those depicted in Sawka’s film. But this only has the effect of making the objective brutality of incarcerating children, whose sole wrongdoing is attempting to cross a border, all the more cruel and depraved.

The film places great emphasis on the intimidation Oscar’s uncle feels in the presence of any representatives of US law and order. None of the various agents acts here improperly or with particular violence. Again, this only reinforces the inhumanity of a situation where millions of men and women are obliged to live in terror for the crime of attempting to make a living for themselves and their families.

Sawka’s *Icebox* concentrates on gang violence as the principal factor in the decision of Oscar’s family to send him away to the US. In part, this is no doubt an effort to build a “stronger case” dramatically and emotionally. Oscar, literally, has no choice—gang members are threatening his life unless he takes part in their activities.

But drug and gang violence themselves are only symptoms of the barbaric social realities confronting the working class and rural poor in Central America, whose impoverished countries have been wracked by intense violence produced, above all, by decades of US imperialist domination. Those generalized conditions have driven vast numbers to head north, where they face further repression and threats to the elementary right to work and live.

The greatest strength of *Icebox* is that the filmmakers have decided, to their credit, to tell the story from the point of view of a 12-year-old Honduran refugee and with unquestionable sympathy and anger.

In Toronto I spoke to Daniel Sawka, the director of Icebox, and actor Matthew Moreno in one conversation, followed by a separate discussion with actors Omar Leyva and Anthony Gonzalez.

David Walsh: The treatment of immigrants by US authorities is an explosive issue, but it’s obviously become far more explosive since you began preparing this film several years ago. Why were you drawn to make a film about this subject?

Daniel Sawka: Migration is an issue I’ve been very, very interested in exploring in film for a long time. My family has, for generations, been forced to leave their homes and relocate. My father’s side of the family is from Poland and Eastern Europe. I was born in Sweden.

So I grew up on a lot of stories about migration. I’ve never had to experience it myself, but it’s always been something I wanted to understand more.

DW: What’s your attitude toward some of the atrocities that have taken place recently, including the separation of children from their parents?

DS: I think it’s a very scary thing for any society in general when you can no longer see children as children, and they become pawns in a political game. There’s a dehumanization that’s going on toward certain

groups of people, and certainly the Hispanic community. When we can't even agree that children should be safe, I don't know how we solve any other issues.

DW: What was it like to work on this film?

Matthew Moreno: It was really enjoyable, despite the serious and gloomy character of the film. It's sad, and it has tense moments. But working on the film was really fun, because we had a great cast, we had a great production, and everyone was so nice. When we got to the actual point of recording, filming, we were happy with ourselves because we knew we were doing something amazing. This is going to be noticed by so many people.

DW: How does it feel to be seen by millions of people?

MM: It's a scary thought. It's not every day that you get to be part of a something that has a message for people. It's really nice to know that you're helping to open people's eyes about something so important, such an important topic, about life and morals.

DW: You can feel, at your age, that you're doing something important?

MM: I feel like this is an important topic to discuss, because some people still don't know about how immigrant children are treated and they need to know about this, so they understand things need to change. Because the things the government is doing are not human, are not humane.

DW: What do you think is driving this anti-immigrant campaign, not only in the US, but worldwide?

DS: It's important to remember that it's happening everywhere. We just had a very depressing election result in Sweden yesterday. I don't know what's driving it, that's what's so tough about it. I don't think anyone really knows how to change this narrative. At least not so far. It's been going down a slippery slope for years and years. I think we have to fight this very actively, because I think the society is heading toward a dangerous place that we haven't seen in generations.

DW: Part of it is an attempt to divert attention from the social crisis by blaming immigrants.

DS: As inequality grows, there's always scapegoating of immigrants, and I think we're seeing that across the world. We're seeing bigger gaps, bigger divides in income and a popular explanation for that is to blame immigrants, who have very little to do with that condition. It's a very difficult state right now.

DW: I don't think the majority of the people, by any means, support this. Even people who voted for Trump didn't vote for this. I think the vast majority are horrified, but they don't know what to do about it.

DS: It's important to remember that the loudest voices are not always the majority voices. It's easy when you read the news to get the impression that there are so many, and I think they thrive on that sensation.

DW: Was the central character a composite? Were there particular stories the writers had heard of?

DS: We did a copious number of interviews, with a lot of child migrants, border patrol officers, social workers, NGOs. The characters are compiled from different pieces, different stories. It was very important for James L. Brooks, the producer, and me to incorporate as many stories as possible, and as accurately as possible.

This is something Jim feels strongly about. He has a social conscience. We discussed every day what was happening in the news, he's very politically involved. He brought a great deal of dedication and passion to this issue.

DW: Would you like to do more movies?

MM: Oh, yes! I'm just starting my life.

David Walsh: The subject of *Icebox* an enormously important issue, and not only in the US. There are attacks on immigrants in Germany, in Italy, in France, everywhere. Why did you participate in this film?

Omar Leyva: I am an immigrant. I'm what people nowadays in the US call a "Dreamer." I was 8 years old, in the 1980s, when I was brought to the US. My father had left me with my grandmother in a village in Mexico, separating me from him. So I didn't meet my father until I was 8. I didn't meet my mother until I was in my 30s because of immigration.

There was already, even before the new measures, a lot of separation with immigration.

It affects your entire life to be separated from your parents, whether it's by "choice" or forcefully. Obviously, the way it's taking place recently, where it's done in what I consider a very brutal way ...

DW: It is brutal, period.

OL: It's already hard enough for people who choose to emigrate to separate themselves from their own family. I look back at the fact that my father and mother separated, it took so long to be reunited with my mother. They were probably each the love of each other's life, and they ended up having to go different ways because of immigration. They each had children later on with different families.

Such conditions affect children in a way that sometimes can be overcome, sometimes not. Children are exposed to a lot of things. I'm a father now of a two-year-old, and I feel so protective of her future—I can't imagine what parents go through. I hate being separated from her for two days, let alone not knowing when we might be reunited.

As an immigrant, I had to be involved in this movie because I love being able to play a character that represents people like me. I'm a native American, from Mexico. People sometimes forget that people from Central America, South America, end up here. We're all Americans. We're neighbors, we're on this land. How we come here, how we help each other, how we look after people who are most vulnerable, really determines who we are.

DW: What's your own attitude toward the immigration issue? Did you have a chance to speak to kids who had been through this?

Anthony Gonzalez: Unfortunately not. Daniel explained a lot of the process he went through, he talked to many people who went through this. He used many of their stories and connected it to Oscar's story.

It was very special for me to be doing the role of Oscar because, first of all, I love the movie and I think it will spread awareness to other people who didn't know that this was going on, who didn't know that kids were getting separated from their families, being locked in a cell, a cage, treated like criminals. I feel like this message is very important. I hope *Icebox* will open their eyes.

DW: I think it will. I don't think the vast majority of the population supports this policy, even with all the propaganda. It's important to remember as well that this didn't just start with Donald Trump. Barack Obama deported 400,000 people. It's the status quo in America that's the problem.

OL: They say, we are worried about criminal elements. But then, they say, we don't even want the victims of crime to come here. That's a whole different level. Next, we don't even want people who are here legally but who took some sort of assistance, we don't want them. There's something else behind that, it's an escalation.

DW: It's an endless spiral.

OL: I'm proud that a lot of people stood up and pushed back and the government had to stop that nonsense, that policy of separating kids, at least temporarily. We still don't know where some of these kids are. It may be a long time before some of them are reunited with their parents.

AG: My parents risked everything to come to the US to give us a better life. They came from Guatemala in their teens. We're thankful because we have opportunities they didn't have. That's why it was important for me to do the role of Oscar. To understand what they risked.

DW: In my view people should have the right to work and live in any country they choose. "Illegal alien" is a filthy concept. Capital flows across borders, rich people go wherever they like, production goes

anywhere there is cheap labor. Only the workers can't move around. So we think they should have the right to live and work in any country they chose.

OL: I agree with you.



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