

10th annual GuadaLAjara Film Festival

***No Man's Land*: A strictly delimited movie about borders**

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This is the second part of a two-part series on the 10th edition of the GuadaLAjara Film Festival held virtually from December 17 through December 19, 2020.

Parts of the border wall between the United States and Mexico stand north of the Rio Grande, which is the official border between the two countries. Thousands of people live north of the Texas border but south of the border wall, and many Latin American emigrants attempt to pass through this region on their way to other parts of the United States. *No Man's Land* (2021), a Western featured at the GuadaLAjara Film Festival in December 2020, uses this region to raise questions about immigration and national divisions.

Bill Greer (Frank Grillo) lives with his wife Monica (Andie McDowell) and two sons on a cattle ranch not far from the Mexican border. The entire family works on the ranch, which Bill is afraid he might lose because of financial difficulties. He has high hopes for his son Jackson (Jake Allyn), who is preparing to move to New York to start his career as a pitcher with the New York Yankees. His other son Lucas (Alex MacNicoll) will continue working on the ranch.

One night, the family hears a commotion and realizes that people, presumably Mexicans, are trying to steal their cattle. Bill, Jackson and Luke grab their rifles and chase the thieves away. But Bill soon realizes that 10 cows are missing, which represents a significant financial loss.

The next day, Bill announces that he and Luke are going to Mexico, guns in hand, to reclaim their property. He warns Jackson to stay behind and practice, not wanting to jeopardize the latter's baseball career. Jackson fidgets restlessly after they have gone, then

abruptly takes a rifle and follows them, apparently spurred by a sense of duty and a need for excitement.

After nightfall, Bill and Luke encounter Gustavo (Jorge A. Jiménez) and his family, who are attempting to cross into the United States. The ranchers begin threatening the Mexican family, and Jackson soon bursts onto the scene. In the ensuing confusion, Luke is shot and seriously wounded, and Jackson kills Gustavo's young son.

While in custody, Bill tells Texas Ranger Ramírez (George López) that he is responsible for the boy's death. He wants to enable Jackson to pursue his chance at a better life in New York. Wracked with guilt and grief, Jackson returns to the scene of the incident and finds the slain boy's wallet. Picking it up, he decides to ride his horse to Mexico in hopes of finding Gustavo and somehow making amends. Meanwhile, his religious faith deeply shaken, Gustavo resolves to find Jackson and exact revenge.

Lead actor Jake Allyn co-wrote *No Man's Land*, and his brother Conor Allyn directed it. To their credit, they have created realistic characters whom they treat with sympathy. Bill, for example, has grown angry about the emigrants (whom he considers trespassers) who arrive on his land with increasing frequency, but we gather that he does not hate them. Monica reminds him that they used to put blankets and bottles of water out for the emigrants. Pointing out that coyotes, drugs and guns have entered the picture, Bill replies that things have changed. "We've changed, too," admonishes Monica.

The Mexico through which Jackson travels is neither exotic nor decrepit. We are presented, rather, with a picture that feels true. The father of one family that

takes Jackson in gives him the kind of dirty work that many immigrants are forced to accept. But when he sees Jackson's diligence and skills, he warms to him. His daughter, who speaks English, takes Jackson out to a bar one night to show him a good time.

While riding a bus to Guanajuato, where Gustavo lives, Jackson overhears a Mexican woman reading *Huckleberry Finn* to her son. During their conversation, Jackson is respectful and ready to learn about the country. The woman, an English teacher, shows maternal affection for Jackson and patiently helps him with his poor Spanish. This scene emphasizes the essential humanity that unites people, despite their linguistic differences, and shows how culture can unite people internationally.

Allyn gives a commendable performance as Jackson. He effectively portrays a character who is principled and hard-working but also naïve and impulsive. Despite his ranching and horsemanship skills, he carries himself in Mexico with humility, knowing that he is an outsider. His sense of guilt and responsibility remains palpable.

Jiménez, too, shines in his portrayal of Gustavo. The death of his son transforms him from a mild and devout protector to a cynic seething with suppressed rage. Andrés Delgado is suitably menacing and odious as Luis, the coyote whom Gustavo enlists to help him find Jackson, but his is the movie's only one-dimensional character.

If the strength of *No Man's Land* is its humanity, its weakness is closely related. The movie focuses on the personal qualities of its characters and excludes almost completely an examination of the larger social and economic issues that they confront. The reason for the uncertain future of Bill's ranch and the forces motivating Latin Americans to steal cattle or enter the United States are not examined. Luke tells Jackson that emigrants keep trying to cross the border because they are hungry. But why are they hungry? What is Mexico's relationship with the United States?

Conor Allyn focused the film on personal concerns "to steer clear of the highly polarized landscape," according to his director's statement. "We didn't want to get locked in by the politics of immigration," Jake Allyn said in an interview with film critic Charles Bramesco.

The brothers have objective reasons for their

decision. Their father, Rob Allyn, chairman and CEO of Margate House Films, has had a long career in right-wing politics. After graduating from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, Allyn became a speechwriter for Republican Governor Bill Clements of Texas in the early 1980s. Clements was a millionaire oilman who had served as deputy secretary of defense for President Richard Nixon.

Allyn started a public relations agency in 1983 and worked for 25 years as a political strategist. One of his clients was former Mexican President Vicente Fox, whose 2007 memoir he helped write. Before becoming president, Fox had been the CEO of Coca-Cola Mexico. Fox's neoliberal policies of austerity and deregulation drove masses of Mexicans to attempt to enter the United States in search of work. Fox was a reliable ally of reactionary President George W. Bush, who illegally invaded Iraq in 2003. Fox also tried unsuccessfully to remove Andrés Manuel López Obrador as mayor of Mexico City and prevent him from participating in the 2006 presidential election.

In their interview with Bramesco, Jake described Fox as a great man, and Conor said that Fox had inspired the character of Gustavo. The brothers doubtless knew that any attempt to address the political or economic aspects of their story would force them to examine the policies of Fox, Bush and subsequent Mexican and American presidents. Whether they realize it or not, their stated desire to avoid politics is a cover for their tacit support of the existing political setup. It will take artists with a different class orientation than that of the Allyns to examine these issues honestly.



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