

# An interview with Bryan Wizemann, writer-director of *You Mean Everything to Me*: “There’s another ‘underserved’ population ... and that’s people without money”

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The WSWS recently reviewed *You Mean Everything to Me*, written and directed by American independent filmmaker Bryan Wizemann. The film, set in Brooklyn, follows a young woman, Cassandra (Morgan Saylor), who, faced with homelessness, comes under the spell of a local DJ, Nathan (Ben Rosenfield).

Increasingly and, in the end, dangerously, Nathan takes over Cassandra’s life for all intents and purposes. He convinces her to leave her job and dance at his club. He pushes her in other, more disturbing directions too. Confused and desperate, she faces difficult decisions, which now involve another person as well.

We wrote that there were “important aspects of *You Mean Everything to Me* that ring true: the generally impoverished social and cultural surroundings, the straitened circumstances of a generation (in their mid- to late 20s) at loose ends in numerous ways, the intense physical and psychic coldness that New York’s streets present to the destitute or near-destitute.”

We also had certain criticisms, but Wizemann’s film is certainly more realistic and dramatic than almost anything else being produced at the moment. It is available online.

In 2011, the WSWS reviewed an earlier feature film by Wizemann, *About Sunny* (or, as it was entitled at the time of its screening during the Toronto film festival that year, *Think of Me*). We also spoke to the writer-director in Toronto.

*About Sunny* is available online as well, as is the amusing, slightly troubling work, *Film Makes Us Happy*, which Wizemann describes as “a short documentary documenting the last fight my wife and I will ever have about filmmaking.”

We recently spoke again on a video call.

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David Walsh: There are things about your own background that are interesting and that may be a little bit unusual. I wonder if you could provide a little mini-biography.

Bryan Wizemann: I think it is sometimes hard for me to escape that biography. My father transplanted us from Natick, Massachusetts, outside of Boston, when I was about five years old, and we ended up in Las Vegas. Then my parents’ marriage sort of slowly devolved.

My father left my mother with some junk stocks and more or less hid all his assets. So, when he left, she really had nothing. We went from being a middle class family to a situation where my mother was single and working and poor. She lied her way into a secretarial job, having not worked previously. She was also a janitor in secret at night and would sometimes bring me along to this indoor soccer academy.

So, for my middle school and early high school adolescence, we just

never had money. We qualified for free lunches. My brother and I would go to the mall and we would dig coins out of the fountain. My mother eventually started to do better in real estate toward the end of my high school years, but I have had a job since I was 14. I worked at a hot dog stand, I worked as a cook in a Mexican restaurant. I was dismayed to find that when you are applying to colleges the fact that you worked all through high school does not carry much weight, unfortunately.

Those years of being strapped for money, of poverty, inform a lot of what I do, and they also helped determine the people I was friends with. Class far more than race or any other factor seems to define who you hang out with.

DW: My tongue is in my cheek here, but so you feel an affinity for Charles Dickens in the blacking [boot polish] shop?

BW: Yes, it’s funny, I was just speaking about that. His family were in debtors’ prison for some months.

DW: They experienced a social descent, from middle class respectability to poverty and humiliation. Dickens worked 10 hours a day in this horrible job.

BW: He could not believe that people had to work this hard and live this way. It influenced everything he did for the rest of his life, and I think I am certainly in that boat.

When you write, things come out, including past traumas or things you witness or experience. But eventually, you get to a place where you do not have to do that anymore and you start to do more works of the imagination.

DW: That element of economic instability and the possibility that people can go from one class to another in a very abrupt and rapid fashion is something that does not leave you, and why should it? It’s the reality of life in this society.

BW: In the opening of *You Mean Everything to Me* I was trying to capture something. Usually, homelessness is not an immediate thing. It is either a health bill or a breakup that displaces someone, and then they stay with their sister, they stay with their cousin, they stay with another friend and that works for about a month or two, and then they have a falling out and they are on the street.

I cannot tell you how many times I have read this story, so I wanted that to happen to Cassandra early in the film. She is living out of her car because she had a breakup and decided to leave Austin, Texas. She has her sister in New York, she has some place to go, but when that falls through, she is back in her car again.

DW: For the benefit of my readers, could you explain the background to the film. I understand the idea has been gestating a long time.

BW: I have been holding on to it for some 30 years, because it is an

amalgam of two stories of people who I grew up with in Las Vegas.

I was in a relationship with one of them and then she got caught up in an abusive relationship, and I was powerless to help. Later, another friend of mine, because of bad luck and a series of bad decisions, found herself working at a strip club. In Vegas they are on every corner. It is a quick way to make money, you get exposed to cheap drugs and to the lowest common denominator of people who are willing to exploit you. It was not long before someone insinuated himself into her life and started prostituting her. I could not believe that it was happening right in front of us. This was when I was still in high school.

You could only glean little bits of the truth about those relationships, but both raised this idea of coercive control, a term I did not know about until I started doing research. There is a statistic that indicates a woman leaves an abusive relationship seven times before she ultimately leaves for good.

What I was always drawn to was not something I invented as a plot device. This is something that happens countless times, mostly because of poverty, mostly because of dire circumstances. When researchers would talk to teens and young adults on the street, they would ask how it happened and the woman would say, "Well, my boyfriend and I were on drugs, we ran out of money, and he told me to go do this." I expected much more depth and detail, but it was very transactional and heartbreaking.

This can also happen to anyone, even though the majority of cases are driven by economic hardship. It also happens to people who have plenty of money and resources and support groups. People come up to me after this film all the time and they say, "My sister's been in this horrible relationship, and she's a lawyer and she can't get out of it."

*You Mean Everything to Me* introduces more questions than it has answers. It is a dramatization of one particular relationship in which coercive control plays a role.

The patterns of control are similar in that if someone asks you to buy them a drink or tries your drink, this is already manipulation. They want to see how willing you are to give something up, and it goes from there, to isolating you from friends and family, to taking over your finances. This process brought to its worst and final end becomes exploiting the person as an object rather than a human being, which is why prostitution is such an ugly thing.

DW: They take their cue from the people who run things. The pimp on the street is a small-time exploiter compared to Jeff Bezos and the billionaires who run the world.

BW: There is a great *New Yorker* cartoon from years back where two businessmen are walking by a mugging, a guy with a gun is holding somebody up, and one of the businessmen says to the other, "Amateur."

DW: I rest my case. I was interested to see that you had difficulties getting the film into film festivals. Let me just say, if I have certain criticisms of the film, those are relative ones. It is far more interesting than just about anything else that you can see in a movie theater or on television.

BW: I appreciate your saying that. Unfortunately, the problem with the festivals, I think, had something to do with the pandemic, with people becoming gun-shy in regard to challenging or provocative material.

When we started, we were invited to the Sundance Sound Design Lab at Skywalker Ranch in northern California. It was an amazing experience for a film that was made for under \$100,000 to have a fully orchestrated original score.

I sent *You Mean Everything to Me* to a film critic friend of mine, who said "this film reminds me of everything I loved about cinema when I was younger." Tribeca reached out to us months before their festival and said they loved the film. We had nothing but great feedback.

All the major festivals loved telling us how much they responded to the film, yet none of them accepted it. We also contacted about 400 critics when we opened in New York, and we got about four or five reviews.

There is such a thing as festival fever when people are excited, and you have the imprimatur of a major event like that.

We have Sundance in our credits. They certainly helped us. But without broader festival support a small film like this can really get lost.

DW: Do you think it is possible as well, and this is speculation, that the film in some ways is *too* realistic? Both in the sense that it has certain psychologically grim elements, and also that the male character is not punished sufficiently, the woman is not "empowered" or heroic enough. It shows someone frankly who remains fairly vulnerable right to the end, which seems to me to be realistic, but may not make certain people happy.

BW: You may be exactly right. In *About Sunny*, the character has gone through a difficult process, but ends up exactly where she started, or at least she is no better off financially. She is even out of a job. However, she has her child, and she has made the decision to keep her.

In *You Mean Everything to Me*, Cassandra has finally broken free of this manipulative relationship. But she is left with nothing. She leaves her car, she leaves her phone, she leaves her money, she leaves everything behind, which, in fact, is what survivor networks tell you to do. They say, when you leave, leave everything. You do not want your phone; you want to cut yourself off and not be contacted.

As other people pointed out, and as you said, we have an unresolved sexual assault in this film. In a "normal" Hollywood film that person would get their comeuppance, that person would be killed at the end or something, but that is not real. I think the realism of this film does make it difficult. More than one person, who I thought had a real stomach or stamina for this kind of challenging material, said there are parts that are hard to watch.

Everything goes in many commercial films. Critics and audiences apparently happily sit through a woman having sex with a car or random graphic murder, if there is an element of fantasy there. Because then it is no longer holding up a mirror to society, it is not a social issue film, it is not something they have to think about and recognize that it happens ten thousand times in a year.

I hope it is not the case, but it certainly changes how I write and what I write. Ultimately, if audiences or festivals do not respond to what you are doing, it is much harder to sustain any kind of career in film, if such a thing exists at all.

DW: I am curious, and I think my readers would be curious, to know how an independent, low-budget film like this is made. Could you walk me through how *You Mean Everything to Me* was written, how the money was raised, how the cast and crew were organized, and with what difficulties?

BW: It was certainly written to be made inexpensively, but, even so, as you go out to producers and production companies, they will tell you that "dramas aren't selling right now" or this is "a little too dark" or "too bleak." There are a few actors who said, "Oh, I don't want to do prostitution, or anything like that."

So, you try and go the normal route, but it becomes pretty clear this has to be a film that is self-financed. The US does not have a British film lottery, we do not have government support at all. Many of the socially realistic films that influenced me are government-funded movies. In this country, you simply have to beg people with money.

I phoned the one person I know with money, my high school debate partner, who became a successful attorney. Among his friends, he was able to raise some \$60,000 in a matter of a few hours, which was amazing. I begged my brother and my mom to kick in some money. Then, luckily, we were able to get actors who I love and with whom my editor had worked, including Morgan Saylor, from *White Girl* [2016]. Ben Rosenfield was recommended to me. It was lovely to work with them and for them to be so committed when no one is making any money.

My cinematographer, Mark Schwartzbard, who I have worked with now on four films, did not take a salary at all. He basically donated all his

lights and found a very cheap camera. After this film, he shot a \$20 million Universal film called *The Photograph* [2020] with LaKeith Stanfield. My editor was able to do an assembly, basically, for charity.

We shot at my friend's bar, we shot in the producer's apartment, we used my car, we would shoot on the street without permits. We did not have permits for any of the shots of the trains. We paid for a restaurant, we paid for a grocery store, which is hard to find. I think that was \$500, and the club was around the same. This was all in Brooklyn. I live here and the actors were here, it was much cheaper for us to relocate the script to New York and just shoot it locally. I do not think it damaged it in any way. There are not strip clubs in New York the way they are ever-present in Las Vegas, so I had to call it a private dance club.

DW: It is believable. Those scenes are unpleasant and convincing.

BW: We shot with the same camera that Mark used on *Master of None* [2015], the Netflix series, a Panasonic VariCam because it is a great low-light camera. We had great lenses. Everything is a hustle, everything is wheeling and dealing. But because I was a producer on the project, I had time to really break down the script. I did dozens of versions of the schedule and the script had 50 revisions. We had three days of rehearsal in the actual locations where we were shooting, and I cannot tell you how much that helped.

We all really knew what we were doing, and I have had crew members come up to my producer and confide in him that it was the best independent shoot that they have been on, in terms of keeping it to 10-hour days. It was very calm, it was well-run. We were very fortunate because sometimes these things can go off the rails very quickly.

DW: So, this was less than \$100,000?

BW: Not counting the five thousand that Sundance gave us, we shot it for about \$88,000. We had a few bills to pay afterward. We were able to book three hours of time with the Budapest Scoring Symphony Orchestra. The composer did it through Skype, I think that was \$3,000.

DW: So how long did this process take?

BW: Probably two to three years of active development and that is after being turned down by the gatekeepers on the West Coast.

DW: Your script was turned down?

BW: Or shuffled around. Nobody ever says no, they just pass it on.

The dirty secret in independent film is that it is really a rich man's game. The vast majority of people I know working in independent film do not have to work for a living, they work very hard, they just do not have to juggle a day job on top of their film work.

I have a full-time job, and I also teach a screenwriting class at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. So, when I need to make a film, fortunately, I can take unpaid leave, a sabbatical.

It is an interesting question—what makes an “independent film”? Is Paul Thomas Anderson's *Licorice Pizza* an “independent film”? I have not seen it; it seems a like a lovely film. Is it that much better than my little film if you can make such a comparison? In any case, is it 400 times better, because that was a \$40 million film?

DW: This is a sweeping question, but from your point of view, what are some of the general trends, either good or bad, in film and television production affecting independent filmmakers? And have they been accelerated in any way by the pandemic?

BW: I can tell you what is happening around me. A few years ago, there was a move to episodic because of the streaming developments. People I know who had documentaries or fiction scripts were suddenly trying to figure out how to break them up into 10 longer pieces because that seemed to be what was getting made.

There's also a move toward genre material, such as what is called “elevated horror.” This is a big trend right now because there seems to be a built-in audience. So much of film is based on the tastes of 14-year-old boys because they cannot go to a bar, they want to take a date to a horror movie, and they see the same movie week after week. That is probably

what fuels the Marvel Universe in part.

A great many people have had success with elevated genre films, not straight horror, for example, but the “thinking man's horror movie.”

You are at the mercy of the market in this country. You have to try and craft a film that has some sort of salability. You are forced to make it like a fast food product. It is unfortunate because art should be outside of this sort of calculation. But that is the reality if you want to get something financed. Things in general are becoming more commercial and it is affecting what I do to. The things I have been writing lately are much more commercial than they ever have been because I would like to keep making films and this is what the market is dictating.

What I would say is there's another ‘underserved’ population that's hard to see and harder to help and that is people without money, people who do not come from money. I really wish that Sundance and the rest looked at one's economic background as part of their consideration process.

DW: In our view, diversity is nine times out of ten a fraudulent phrase because it does not involve *social* diversity. It simply means that affluent people from certain groups come in, but the social composition does not change, the social focus does not change, the essential subject matter does not change. The skin color or sexual orientation changes, but the perspective remains the same. Where are the directors from the working class, from the poor, or the directors who make films about the working class or the poor? Of course, that is a rhetorical question, we know the answer.

BW: My stepfather, who recently passed away, was a stocky black guy who worked construction. He was a really beloved foreman. I would talk to him about these things, the “social justice” movement and so on, and I would ask him whether he thought things were improving. He was so jaded, he would say, “Oh, I don't know.” It never moved him very much, for the same reason you are speaking about, these are class questions.

DW: I have spoken to more than one “independent filmmaker” who told me they were under the radar in Hollywood, they would never do a studio film—and the next thing you read, they are directing the latest in the *Terminator* franchise or *Ocean's 13* or *14*. I understand the economic temptation, but you pay a price. People convince themselves that they will not be any different if they do a \$50 million film, but they actually do change.

BW: I fear that you might be right. I was a huge fan of Chloé Zhao's *The Rider* [2017]. I was less won over by *Nomadland* [2020], but it was still a quality film. But then to jump from those hybrid-documentary films that are lightly scripted to a Marvel movie like *Eternals* [2021] ... I do not think the skill sets necessarily translate. It is not where her vision and passion lie, it is not what she set out to do in film. As a result, you get a really poor film. I can see the seduction if you are trying to legitimize yourself and you get some huge offer.

DW: I understand what people say to themselves. But filmmaking is not simply making a living, it is not like plumbing, for better or worse, it involves and depends on your conscientiousness, on your putting your heart and soul into it. And working on something that is rubbish changes that part of you.

BW: I should be so lucky to have to turn down such a thing.

DW: Please do though.

BW: I'll certainly think of you at such a moment.

DW: I refuse to do another interview if you do *Thor 12*!

BW: I think the way they get a hold of you is to say: one for us, one for you. If you want to do a project you feel passionate about, fine, but first you have to direct the next *Dumb and Dumber*. The situation is difficult.

DW: Thank you for taking the time. Good luck with your future work.



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