

Freep Film Festival 2019 in Detroit—Part 2

***Midnight Family* from Mexico, *The Last Truck* and *American Factory*—about a former GM plant, murderous Detroit police and *I Am Richard Pryor*: A mixed lot**

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This is the second and final part of a series of articles on the recent Freep Film Festival in Detroit, held April 10-14. Part 1 was posted April 17.

Films about conditions of life screened at the Freep Film Festival in Detroit were a mixed lot: in some cases, good intentions were mingled with a socially non-committal attitude; in others, an obvious feeling for important issues was marred by middle-class prejudices and conceptions.

Midnight Family

Director Luke Lorentzen's *Midnight Family* opens with an intertitle explaining that the government of Mexico City operates only 45 public ambulances for a population of 9 million. This appalling reality is the subject of the documentary that focuses on the Ochoa family, one of many who eke out a meager existence as Emergency Medical Technicians [EMTs] driving their own private ambulances.

The competition in this field is cutthroat as multiple contenders chaotically race, often neck and neck, to the scene of a medical emergency. To stack the odds in their favor, the Ochoas use a public address system to help clear traffic as they maniacally drive to their destinations.

Juan Ochoa, 17, plays a leading role in the family's paramedic business, cleaning and replenishing supplies for a vehicle that often doubles as a sleeper. The Ochoas appear highly skilled in dealing with trauma, but keeping the ambulance on the road depends more on bribing police than maintaining proper certification.

Midnight Family implies that the Ochoas and other private paramedics attempt to convince their patients to be transported to private hospitals—where the latter will have to pay—because it is the only means the family members have of being compensated for their efforts, which are considerable.

In one brief scene, a hospital receptionist can be seen slipping money to the Ochoas. Most of their human cargo are too poor to pay, and the Ochoas themselves are barely keeping their heads above water. It is a painful balancing act between properly handling emergency care and earning a living.

In one voiceover, a grieving mother accuses the Ochoas of causing the death of her daughter because they bypassed a public hospital for

a far-away private one. The 3,800 pesos the Ochoas charge for emergency transport is approximately \$US200.

Mexico, with the 10th largest population in the world and beset with explosive social contradictions, is a country boiling with discontent. Unfortunately, Lorentzen's *Midnight Family* suffers from a certain passivity, and it lacks any social or historical context, the products apparently of what the director calls "observational" filmmaking.

Poletown Lives!

The 1983 documentary, *Poletown Lives!*, directed by George Corsetti, Jeannie Wylie and Richard Weiske, chronicles the fight of the working-class residents in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck. The residents bitterly resist the effort by auto giant General Motors and the Detroit city government to evict 4,200 residents and bulldoze their homes, churches and small businesses to make way for a new assembly plant.

The Detroit-Hamtramck plant eventually opened in 1985. In 2018, GM announced it would be closing the facility.

While many long-time Poletown residents in the film proudly describe their neighborhood as stable and integrated, a GM spokesperson portrays it as "distressed and decaying."

Detroit's first African American mayor, Coleman Young, and the United Auto Workers (UAW) support the project, along with the city's Catholic hierarchy. We see Poletown residents picketing the 1981 GM stockholders meeting and demonstrating outside the downtown offices of the Catholic Archdiocese after two neighborhood churches are sold for millions of dollars. When the community organizes a "sit-down" at one of the churches, Young sends a SWAT team to evict them.

In a question-and-answer session at the film's screening, director Corsetti, a Green Party member, condemned capitalism: "We need an economic system for people's needs. Politicians are in the pocket of GM. It's a corrupt system—and the media plays a role. It distorts reality, such as the campaign on 'weapons of mass destruction.' The media lies to us on a regular basis."

The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant (2009) and American Factory (2019)

Both documentaries, *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009) and *American Factory* (2019), are co-directed by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert.

The first deals with the Christmas time 2008 closing of the General Motors assembly plant in Moraine, Ohio, resulting in the destruction of the jobs of 2,500 line workers and 200 management personnel. Its closure devastated the community.

The movie concentrates on interviewing workers, such as Kathy, a body shop employee, Kim, an electrician, and Popeye, a toolmaker. Each makes moving comments. *The Last Truck* captures a social tragedy, the destruction of hopes and lives in the naked pursuit of profit.

The UAW is absent from the film, including its role in facilitating the closure.

The reason for the filmmakers' silence about the union's role becomes clearer in the 2019 follow-up documentary, *American Factory*, concerning the purchase of the same Moraine facility by a Chinese billionaire, Cao Dewang, and its reopening in 2014 as Fuyao Glass America, a maker of windshields for auto manufacturers.

One former GM worker explains that at the auto plant she made over \$29 an hour, while she now earns less than \$13. Chinese transplanted workers also suffer. They have been brought to the US, forced to leave their families for several years at a time.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, the Democrat from Ohio, attends the opening ceremony and promotes the benefits of the UAW. Fuyao founder Cao thunders that "if the union comes in, I'm shutting down."

While Bognar and Reichert spend time showing why, in their opinion, the plant should be organized—and there are many egregious safety and job security issues—they are bewildered when the workers reject the UAW in 2017. *American Factory* attributes the defeat to management intimidation and the film's anti-Chinese bent becomes more pronounced. In fact, the workers had no reason whatsoever to bring in the UAW, whose betrayals had landed them in their present predicament.

The issue in Moraine is not fundamentally "American" versus "Chinese" methods, but different stages in the global capitalist crisis and the offensive by the corporations against workers' living standards and conditions everywhere.

New hires at GM have had their wages slashed to the level of Fuyao workers. Of course, Fuyao management is ruthlessly trying to extract every ounce of blood from both their American and Chinese workforces. But the conditions at the Moraine Fuyao plant are fundamentally no different than those at Jeff Bezos' Amazon sweatshops. This level of brutal exploitation is once again becoming the norm in the US.

Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win

The Detroit Police Department's notorious STRESS (Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) unit, which functioned between 1971 and 1974, is the subject of Christopher Gruse's documentary, *Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Detroit police were notorious for their violence against minority youth and STRESS killed 24 men, of whom 22 were African-American, during two and a half years. Coleman Young was elected in 1973 pledging to disband the unit and integrate the police force.

Featured prominently in the movie is Ken Cockrel Sr. (1938-1989), a black radical attorney. He was known for his defense of the victims of police violence. The film depicts him successfully representing

Hayward Brown, a young black man accused of shooting a Detroit police officer. Cockrel demonstrated that Brown fired in self-defense because the actions of the STRESS unit had created a climate of fear among Detroit's African Americans.

Cockrel's widow, Sheila, a former Detroit city councilor, is the documentary's main commentator, among a slew of academics and others, whose primary function is to assert, without providing any proof, that racism was rampant not only in the police force but among white Detroiters as a whole. ("STRESS was welcomed by white Detroiters who saw black Detroiters as criminals.")

In fact, as the WSWs once noted, as "social inequality grew in the 1970s and 1980s—particularly as the mass layoffs and plant shutdowns in the auto industry turned Detroit into the poorest big city in America—Young strengthened the powers of the police and embraced the politics of law and order."

Young's successor, Dennis Archer, another of the film's talking heads, presided over a city even more socially polarized than it was during the Young administration.

While the Detroit-area auto companies, the WSWs wrote in May 2000, "record tens of billions in profits, many of the city's working class areas are virtually uninhabitable after years of chronic poverty, unemployment and budget cutting. High-stakes gamblers bet more on a single roll of the dice at the newly built casinos than many residents of the city's blighted neighborhoods earn in an entire year. These are the conditions that have led the city's business and political establishment to rely even more on the brute force of the police."

I Am Richard Pryor

Jesse James Miller's *I Am Richard Pryor* presents a sincere and moving account of the comedian/actor's life and career. The documentary consists of a series of interviews with Pryor's colleagues, family, friends and admirers.

The cast of interviewees include Pryor's widow Jennifer Lee Pryor, former manager Ron De Blasio and former student Tiffany Haddish, as well as a host of academics and industry professionals both personally associated with and unconnected to Pryor, who died in 2005 of medical issues related to multiple sclerosis.

The veteran documentarian Miller does a fine job at conveying the comic's tremendous talent, charm and perceptiveness. *I Am Richard Pryor* is refreshingly devoid of the moralistic, "stay-in-your-lane"-type politics so common among upper-middle class layers at present. This might be attributable in part to Pryor's own lasting influence. Coming from a poor, African American community in Peoria, Illinois, he famously broke down racial and cultural barriers existing in the mainstream media at the time.

The gifted comic, who was outspokenly anti-establishment, incorporated into his work many issues associated with the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s. He proves to be a difficult subject to exploit for any kind of racialist or segregationist narrative. Miller's documentary is a breath of fresh air in the current climate.

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