



JAMES KICKLIGHTER

DIRECTOR • PRODUCER

Travis Tammero (UTA)

Lucius Cary (Rain)

BIOGRAPHY

James Kicklighter was born in 1988, where he spent the first eighteen years of his life in Bellville, Georgia, population 123. He has gone on to become an award-winning director and producer of narrative films, documentaries and advertising. He is an active member of the Director's Branch of the Television Academy, and is a p.g.a. producer.

His work has been recognized by the world's press, including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Deadline Hollywood*, *Politico*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Times of India*. Kicklighter has served as a panelist at the Oscar®-qualifying Hollyshorts Film Festival, taught filmmaking courses on Stage32.com, and his interview series with the popular YouTube channel Film Courage has over 250,000 views.

He resides in Los Angeles, California and still can't believe he gets to work across the country and around the globe.

THE AMERICAN QUESTION

Director James Kicklighter's latest film is his multi-year documentary, *The American Question*.

Released in 2024, *The American Question* was the #1 new release on Apple TV and earned a perfect 100% rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes. Delving into the heart of a divided America, exploring the historical and contemporary factors that have eroded our trust in our neighbors, communities, institutions, and government. With input from numerous experts, including Colin Woodard, Amy Chua, Yuval Levin, Tania Israel, and narrated by political analyst, Guy Tal Seemann, *The American Question* seeks to answer the pressing question: can America rediscover its unifying values and restore trust among its people?

James Kicklighter, p.g.a. also produces *The American Question*, with a creative team including Guy Seemann, p.g.a., an international political consultant, director of photography Jonathan Pope (Emmy® Award Nominee, *The Social Dilemma*), editors Mohamed El Manasterly (Emmy® Award Winner, "Welcome to Wrexham," *The Square*), J.D. Sievertson, a.c.e. ("The Chi," "Cosmos") and Carlos Puga (Emmy® Award Winner, "True Life"), featuring original animation from Filmograph (*Beetlejuice*, *Beetlejuice*, *Joker: Folie à Deux*, *John Wick*).

THE SOUND OF IDENTITY

In 2021, Kicklighter released *The Sound of Identity*, premiering on STARZ, streaming on Prime Video, and available on demand — rated 91% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes. In the spotlight of global media coverage, Lucia Lucas, the first transgender woman to perform as Don Giovanni in a professional opera, makes her historic debut in one of the reddest states in America.

From director James Kicklighter, *The Sound of Identity* is produced by Emmy Award-winning producers Russ Kirkpatrick & Andy Kinslow and is executive produced by Golden Globe®-winner and Academy Award®-nominated Josh Bachove (*Minari*, *The Little Hours*), with Jonathan Pope (Emmy® Award Nominee, *The Social Dilemma*) as Director of Photography.

PREVIOUS WORK

Kicklighter produced, edited and co-wrote the directorial debut of youth advocate and novelist Jim St. Germain (“A Stone of Hope”), *Every 9 Hours* (2019), a modern-day exploration of skin color and identity in society. Starring Philip Smithey (“Switched at Birth”), Elizabeth Ferrera (“Lethal Weapon”), Kahyun Kim (“American Gods”) and Danny Trejo (*Predator*, *Machete*) the film debuted at numerous film festivals across the country, now streaming on Amazon’s Prime Video.

Returning to the director’s chair, *Angel of Anywhere* (2018) is the story of an empathetic stripper who plays therapist to his many damaged clientele and co-workers. *Angel of Anywhere* stars Briana Evigan (*Step Up Movie 2: The Streets*), Ser’Darius Blain (*Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*, “Charmed”), and introduces Axel Roldos as Angel. Streaming on multiple platforms, *Angel* screened at over a dozen global festivals, including the Oscar® qualifying Hollyshorts and Sidewalk Film Festivals, winning Best Narrative Short at the 2018 Macon Film Festival. The film was distributed domestically by Hewes Pictures on ShortsTV.

His first feature film, *Desires of the Heart*, was released theatrically across India in November 2015. Kris Sharma (*Val Lauren*, *Medal of Honor*, *Sal*) leaves a budding romance with an artist (Alicia Minschew, “All My Children”) in Savannah for a marriage arranged by his parents in India. There, he discovers centuries old secrets that may determine the fate of his destiny. Shot in Savannah and Rajasthan, India, *Desires* was an official selection of numerous festivals across the United States and around the world, including the Cannes Marché du Film and was the winner of Best Foreign Film at the Los Angeles Femme Film Festival.

He was the for Film Director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 Presidential Campaign in Virginia, directing content featuring Sen. Tim Kaine, Sean Astin, Lena Dunham (“Girls”), Kate Walsh, (“Grey’s Anatomy”) Bellamy Young (“Scandal”), Constance Wu (“Fresh off the Boat”), Miley Cyrus, Olympic figure skater Michelle Kwan, former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, amongst other public, private and political figures.

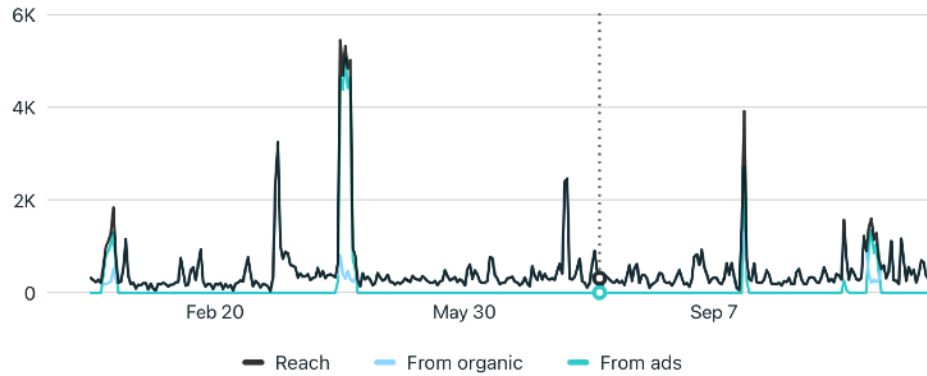
PHILANTHROPY

Director James Kicklighter is on the Advisory Board for AMBITION, a Los Angeles-based entrepreneurial program for disadvantaged youth. He volunteers with Kids in the Spotlight, a Los Angeles-based organization that helps foster youth heal and grow from trauma through the power of storytelling and filmmaking — directing the 2024 film *Whatever it Takes*, and producing the 2023 National Script Competition Winner, *Speak*.

He also serves on the Advisory Board for the Department of Communication Arts at Georgia Southern University, his alma mater. He was chosen out of over 30,000 living graduates to be listed on the inaugural Georgia Southern 40 Under 40 Alumni, selected for “impact in business, leadership, community, educational and/or philanthropic endeavors.”

SOCIAL REACH

FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM VERIFIED ACCOUNTS (2024)



Reach breakdown

Total
86,291 ↑ 463.3%

From organic
51,907 ↑ 4.9K%

From ads
33,511 ↑ 100%

HIGHLIGHTS

SELECTED WORK SAMPLES

Visual Highlight Reel

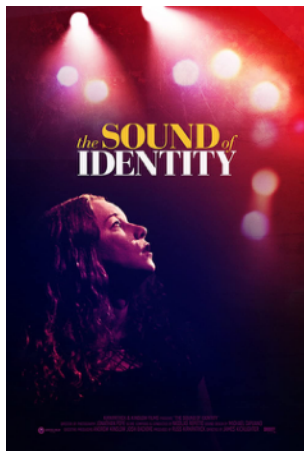
Whatever it Takes

Tulsa Opera Campaign • Madama Butterfly • Carmen

Caesars Cashless China • We the Future • AMI Network

Shel Bee: Branches • Every 9 Hours

SELECTED FULL LENGTH FILMS



POLITICO

How a polarized America walks out of 2024

By JESSE NARANJO and BRAKKTON BOOKER • 10/29/2024 12:04 PM EDT



Hazleton, a city in Pennsylvania's bellwether Luzerne County, saw a rapid demographic shift fueled by an influx of Latino immigrants in recent decades. | Film still courtesy of Gravitas Ventures

What is the “American identity”? Is it even possible for this shared sense of identity to exist in a polarized America?

These are the questions **James Kicklighter** and **Guy Tal Seemann** set out to explore eight years ago after working on **Hillary Clinton's** 2016 presidential campaign, worried about how heated the political discourse had become.



This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

THE RECAST: In the eight years that you spent making this film, how have you found our sense of collective American identity changed? Did it ever exist?

KICKLIGHTER: Many people like to cite after World War II as being a time where America was very unified and integrated — but at the same time, we tend to forget things like racism, discrimination, things that we like to not talk about very much.

And so I think the story of America has always been the identity that we weave for ourselves, while also sometimes ignoring the factors that are not so pleasant.

What we're seeing with the rise of new media — with social media permeating our landscape — is ... now everyone has the ability to speak their truths. It's becoming more challenging to have a national identity, because we're grappling with all these different microcosms. There are voices that have never been heard before; they're being heard for the first time. But then there are groups that have led the country for a long time that are grappling with what their responsibility might be in the social injustices that we are experiencing.

THE RECAST: Nationally, is there a path out of this "us versus them" mentality that's developed over the last few decades?

KICKLIGHTER: If you want to start to solve this problem nationally, you have to be able to fix this problem locally. One thing that amuses me when people talk about politics is they say how Washington is broken and people aren't working for us — but everyone that goes to Washington are elected officials from local places, and if it's that dysfunctional in Washington, D.C, that means it's a microcosm of what's happening back at home.

Los Angeles Times

Election stressing you out? Here are 5 psychologist-approved tips to make you feel better

4. Communicate with kindness

Interacting with people in real life, instead of online, can also help counter election stress. Film director James Kicklighter, whose documentary "The American Question" explores our political divides, says a big part of the problem is that "we interact through social media and other toxic cesspools of un-formed opinions and information," rather than getting to know each other face-to-face at the many opportunities daily life provides, whether in line at a local coffee shop, a weekly fitness class or through community organizations.



November 12, 2024

[View in browser](#)

RELIABLE SOURCES

with BRIAN STELTER

Watch 'The American Question'

Yesterday, I mentioned "**Art of the Surge**," the pro-Trump docuseries that has seen a surge of interest in recent days. Here's another documentary that soared up the Apple charts when it was released last week: ["The American Question."](#) The film explores America's fragmented national identity through interviews with voters in swing states. "We explored over 8 years how this trust deficit in America occurred, over time, discovering what was happening on the ground over that period of time, and what we can do to make it better," director **James Kicklighter** told me.

>> *More:* Kicklighter and the film's narrator **Guy Tal Seemann** [talked with Politico](#) about what they learned on the road...

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The thing of the week



Courtesy of filmmakers

Ahead of the presidential election on Tuesday, the new documentary, [The American Question](#), came out this week (available on-demand), investigating division in the United States with a large focus on two Pennsylvania towns considered particularly consequential in our swing state: Erie and Hazelton. As former factory and coal towns that have experienced major population shifts in recent years, these sites served as case studies as director James Kicklighter explored “how the glue that held Americans together dissolved and why this threatens the stability of America today.”

Filmed over the course of eight years, the film showcases voters on different sides of various issues who shared their fears and motivations on screen as experts explained how increasing intolerance has historically led previous empires to decline. It’s also about the people in Erie and Hazelton (Detroit is the third city featured, too) organizing to bring people together, like the Hazelton Integration Project. The narrator concludes: “It’s not enough to tolerate our differences. Without solutions rooted in the common good, Americans will continue to get angrier. Those who divide us will keep power over society.”



NATION

'American Question' documentary delves into why the country is so divided

1 minute read



Juan Carlos Castillo

Asbury Park Press

Published 11:34 a.m. ET Nov. 7, 2024 | Updated 11:34 a.m. ET Nov. 7, 2024

"The American Question, "a new documentary released this week on Apple TV, is one of the most popular on the streaming platform, and the top new documentary release in the United States.

The film follows Guy Seemann, a political analyst, who spent eight years traveling across the United States, living with families and staying in battleground states like Michigan and Pennsylvania in an effort to understand the division in the country.

The documentary explores the historical and contemporary factors that have eroded trust in American communities, institutions and government. It takes viewers through a journey of America's past, from its founding empires to critical moments in modern history, all while following an independent team's quest to uncover the forces that have fractured the nation.

" 'The American Question' is a deeply personal film for me," said director James Kicklighter in a release. "Growing up in one of America's poorest regions, I experienced firsthand the stark divide between rural life and opportunities in big cities."

"Over the years, it has alarmed me how trust has eroded between these two Americas," he added.

The film highlights personal stories from people in swing states, and offers analysis from political scientists and historians. It sheds light on how economic shifts and the decline of local communities have fractured the national identity.

The American Question Review: Timely & Hopeful

👤 JUSTIN BOWER 🗨️ NOVEMBER 27, 2024



***The American Question* is a very timely documentary which approaches a stressful topic with hope and honesty, documenting various experiences of American life.**

Director: James Kicklighter

Genre: Documentary

Run Time: 90'

U.S. Release: October 29, 2024

U.K. Release: TBA

Where to Watch: [on digital & VOD](#)

To **Guy Seemann**, a former political journalist who also worked in the United States Senate, America is on a dangerous trajectory of increased polarization. The primary issue, he finds, is a lack of trust among fellow citizens. In *The American Question*, Seemann interviews a host of Americans at various levels of involvement in politics.

Journalists for The Atlantic, Yale scholars, residents of the “iconic swing state” of Pennsylvania, as one man called it, and several others wade through the mire of American politics. This **documentary about the fractured state of the nation** could not be more timely. It features eight years of footage, covering events from the 2016 Presidential Election, to monumental recent changes in 2024, including the assassination attempt against Donald Trump and President Joe Biden’s decision to end his re-election candidacy.

The most impactful feature of *The American Question* is its **commitment to respect**. While interviewing people across the spectrum of political belief—from full-on Donald Trump supporters, to people who choose not to vote, to straight-ticket Democrats—Seemann and director James Kicklighter are faithful to the idea of the documentarian as an objective observer. The final product is a bold claim that **Americans of all beliefs and backgrounds have more in common than they think**, and that it is through connection, community, and trust that the nation might again live in harmony.

Within the 90-minute documentary, viewers get a **history lesson of a brief, yet monumental decade**, covering two Presidential Election cycles, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increased use of social media in place of civic engagement centers like religious congregations and unions. Students and community members share how life has changed for them, which highlights another key theme: that people are complex and their views often change over time.

Despite a stressful and heavy topic, the film ends on a hopeful note. Trust and collaboration among political dissenters has eroded, Seemann claims, but Americans are always one step away from change for the common good. It ends with a list of practical steps for political engagement bent on listening, understanding, empathy, and tolerance that every American can contribute to. This is one of those unique contributions to politics that **left me optimistic, rather than stressed and anxious, about America’s future**. It’s a testament to the enduring power of human connection and a call to harness it for the good of the nation.



Film-Authority.com

The American Question ****

2024

'...I'd encourage anyone feeling disenfranchised by recent events to consider James Kicklighter's The American Question, not least because it's free of hysteria and gaslighting, and attempts to understand all sides of a political argument...'



What's the American Question? James Kicklighter's thought-provoking documentary is a look at America's fragmenting sense of identity, a country which has been the leader of the free world and a global hyper-power for over a century, but now finds itself 'shifting to a moment of intolerance' to quote a phrase used here. Kicklighter sees this turbulence as a political problem; he comes from a tiny town in South Georgia, and now lives in LA, and that change of circumstances gives him a welcome openness to understanding multiple perspectives on what's happening to his country.

CINEMACY

REVIEW

‘The American Question’ Review: How to Get Democracy Back on Track

Responding to the common good instead of self-interest is the first step toward our country's much-needed makeover.

BY MORGAN ROJAS | OCTOBER 22, 2024

There are less than three weeks until a pivotal election decision has the potential to upend our democracy as we know it. In the coming days, those on both the right and left are digging in their heels and fighting ruthlessly for what they believe is the best path forward for our country. Director [James Kicklighter](#) takes a wide-lens approach to this divisive historical moment in his eye-opening documentary, *The American Question*. At a time when it seems we are becoming further divided as opposed to united, Kicklighter aims to explore the roots of American polarization and find solutions for a harmonious and symbiotic path forward.

Takeaway

The American Question is an enlightening, non-partisan look at an incredibly sensitive and timely issue. James Kicklighter doesn't just ask the question to create provocative soundbites. He actually leaves audiences with actionable steps to depolarize America. We are in desperate need of a better path forward, and *The American Question* is a great first step.

THE NEWNAN TIMES-HERALD

The American Question

Film Details - The American Question

Director: James Kicklighter

Interviews conducted and narrated by political analyst Guy Seemann with Amy Chua, Colin Woodard, Yuval Levin, Tania Israel, and others

Running Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Available in streaming release

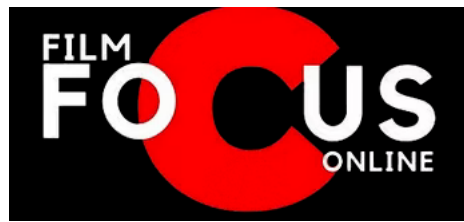
Review Rating: 8/10

Georgia native and talented filmmaker James Kicklighter continues his upward progression with the years-in-the-making "The American Question." Together with frequent collaborator Emmy-nominated cinematographer Jonathan Pope, Kicklighter follows political analyst Guy Seemann as he travels from Israel to the United States to talk with Americans of differing political persuasions.

"The American Question" is a revealing conversation about the polarization and conflicting views that have gripped the nation, especially in light of the recent election results. The film also features a host of notable historians and experts that add much-needed context, framing the various ongoing causes and the historical origins of American division.

In chronicling Seemann's fascinating political, existential journey, Pope and Kicklighter train the camera on various examples of Americana. Over the years, Pope's vivid visuals show stages of industrial change and decay, contributing to arguments among communities as to the root cause of often downward transitions.

Seemann makes for a lowkey and respectful messenger as he skillfully navigates the thorny questions posed to subjects with conflicting positions. Ultimately, he finds some middle ground, although it is hard to ignore that the divisions in the American population run deep and can't be resolved with one thoughtful documentary.



'The American Question' Review: Though-Provoking and Explorative Insight Into America



The documentary-style film includes first-class, personal stories from Americans in swing state communities in Pennsylvania and Michigan. We hear from professors of law, political experts, leading political scientists, and historians, all showcasing how economic shifts have shaped and changed local communities in the USA. Interviewees include Tania Israel (*Beyond Your Bubble*), Colin Woodard (*American Nations*), Amy Chua (*Day of Empire*), and Yuval Levin (*The Fractured Republic*).

The opening is dramatic - as if we're about to watch an intense, hard-hitting insider's documentary. The interviews are softer, so it's not difficult to watch, but you do need to concentrate and listen to follow and understand what is going on. The film does well in being informative; it does not spoon-feed information.

Exploring America through this critical lens is important, as a leading country it has sections that are falling and failing its people, making them question what the future holds.

The film is well shot, with clean-cut interviews, previous footage, and animations, all to help shape the story and keep audiences engaged.

DEADLINE



Courtesy of Shout! Studios

EXCLUSIVE: Shout! Studios is teaming with [Kirkpatrick & Kinslow Productions](#) (KKP) and [Scatena & Rosner Films](#) (SNR) for an exclusive deal to distribute the [James Kicklighter](#)-directed *[The Sound of Identity](#)* in North America. The news was made by Jordan Fields, Vice President of Acquisitions at Shout! Studios, Russ Kirkpatrick with (KKP), and Gato Scatena with SNR.

The Sound of Identity chronicles the lead up to international opera star [Lucia Lucas](#)' historic moment as the first-ever openly transgender woman to perform a principal role in an opera. She made her debut as Don Giovanni in the red state of Oklahoma, breaking barriers and blazing the trail for other trans opera performers.

"This is an inspiring and beautifully filmed story of an artist in peak form, doing what she does best and shattering norms while she's at it," said Shout's Jordan Fields.

"Lucia's voice – that is, her baritone and her personality – is unique and powerful, and it's moving to see Tulsa rally behind her. There's hope for us yet."

"Our work as artists are both informed by our life experiences and the times we live in. Through telling the story of Lucia Lucas, in an era of unprecedented trans visibility, we examine the strides that have been made, but also, the long road ahead for this community," said Kicklighter. "As Lucia empowers others with her voice, I hope audiences will learn something about themselves and the indefatigable human spirit."

don giovanni

James Kicklighter raises the curtain on a transgender opera star in ‘The Sound of Identity’

By [David Reddish](#) June 1, 2021 at 6:06am



Director James Kicklighter

You know, I've talked to so many filmmakers recently, and nobody can seem to quite agree on "proper" representation—what is appropriation, what is exploitation, who has the right to tell which stories. People seem to have double standards. But, there is some resentment when an artist is told he doesn't have the right to tell a certain story because of who he is or how he identifies.

I couldn't agree more. There's a difference between telling a story you have no business telling, and doing the work to make it authentic. I think that it's a really challenging conversation to have at the moment. There are stories I've told in my career that I tried to supplement. If it was something cultural or not in my experience, I tried to surround myself with people that could fill the gap to help me understand, and to elevate those voices. I think you can elevate people who have not been heard without negating their voices.

QUEERTY*

Free of an agenda (except that gay one)



The juxtaposition of *Don Giovanni* is an interesting one, in that his identity is a very fluid one. That's also a theme in Lucia's life, which is kind of cosmic.

There is. It is cosmic—that's a great way of putting it. Right now, I feel there's such a strong emphasis on identity and the types of stories we can tell. For example, if you're a gay director, you can only tell "gay" stories. If you're a person of color, you can only tell stories about people of color. Now, there's nothing wrong with using our identity and experiences to tell authentic stories.

Absolutely.

It's a good thing. For so long, that was not the case. But I was interested in the idea of using that identity as currency. Is that a good thing? Is it a bad thing? I think in this dialogue we're having about representation, it's important to ask that question as well. What's the line between authenticity and exploitation? I felt the dialogue between Lucia and Tobias Picker of the Tulsa Opera had on that was something I wanted to lean into with the film.

Best LGBTQ+ Movies On Hulu Right Now

From fresh innovative stories to queer classics that made history, this is a compilation of the best LGBTQ+ films currently streaming on Hulu.

BY ZOE JORDAN
PUBLISHED JUN 12, 2022



The Sound Of Identity |

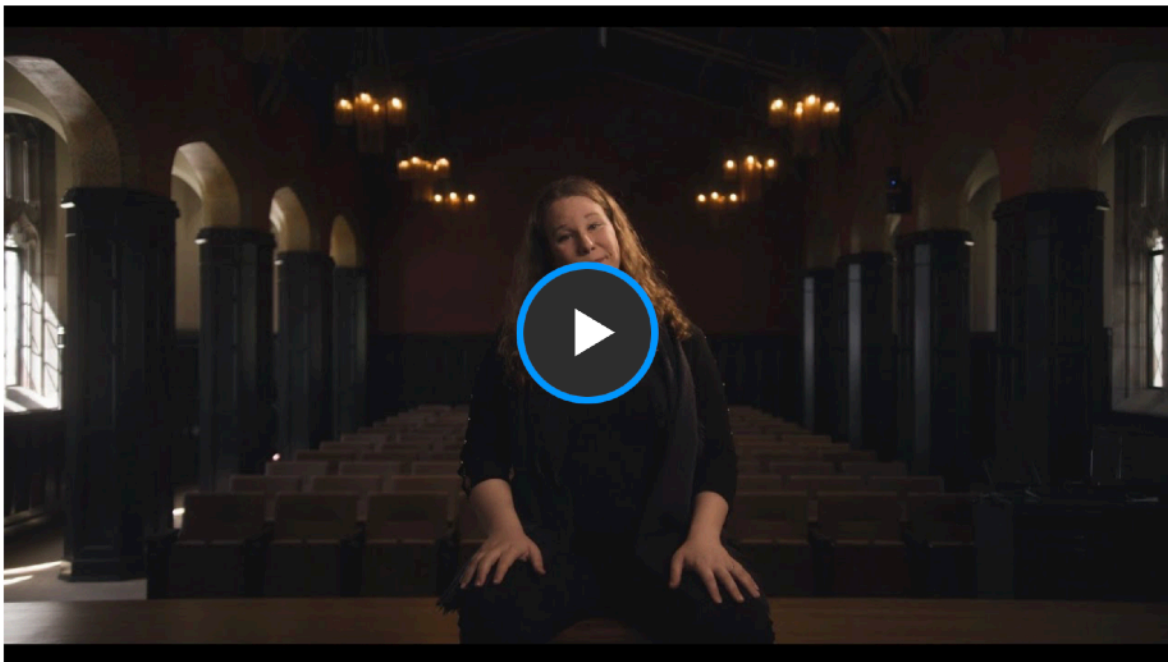
The feature-length documentary *The Sound of Identity* follows the journey Lucia Lucas, the first known openly trans woman to be recorded for the lead performance in an opera group. Her vocals are spotlighted in the film as she hones her skills for her eventual starring role in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with the Tulsa Opera company. *The Sound of Identity* is an enthralling and introspective glimpse into the life of a trans woman in the modern arts as well as an interesting piece on the history of transgender stage performance. Lucia Lucas' vividly inspiring story is translated perfectly to screen.

New documentary examines first transgender singer in opera history to perform in a principal role

Christopher Berinato For Do Savannah

Published 7:00 a.m. ET May 18, 2021

[View Comments](#)



Filmmaker James Kicklighter grew up in Bellville, Georgia, population 123. Kicklighter has come a long way from his small-town roots to become a multi-award winning director of narrative films, documentaries, music videos, and advertisement.

Although he currently is based out of Los Angeles, Kicklighter has strong Georgia roots. He graduated from Georgia Southern University, has had a film in the Macon Film Festival every year since he was nineteen years old, and his debut feature film, "Desires of the Heart," was shot in Savannah.

Growing up in Bellville, Kicklighter had no experience with opera, but that may have worked in his favor while directing this film. Bringing a fresh eye to the opera, Kicklighter, along with his longtime director of photography and former GSU classmate, Jonathan Pope, shot the documentary in a lavish, operatic style that adds poetic heft to the narrative.

The idea of a room shaking baritone voice coming from a woman may seem hard to reconcile for some viewers, but Kicklighter found a way around this quandary, so that audiences could focus on the story.

“The opening scene of the film, we actually hear her sing before we see her and that’s a choice I wanted to intentionally make, that you hear the voice before you see the person the voice is coming out of, because we associate so much of the voice identity and gender based off of physical attributes,” said Kicklighter. “I think exploring the idea of how we associate voice with gender, and how they explore that in the show was something that was very important for the audience to hear front-and-center, at the very beginning of the film. I wanted you to hear that voice, think about whatever predispositions you might have, and throw that away so that we’re not lingering on that the entire film.”



James Kicklighter *Xintong Li*

Kicklighter finished shooting his next film, "The American Question," right before the pandemic began, and is currently in post-production. Kicklighter been shooting the ambitious multi-documentary since December 2016.

“I’d worked for Hillary Clinton as a filmmaker for her campaign, and after we lost it was a lot to process,” said Kicklighter. “This project came across my desk to say, ‘How does American polarization happen and what if we followed ordinary people in these swing counties that swung from democratic to republican for the first time in a generation?’ We followed these folks for a few years to see how they change and their community evolves and pair that with experts who can explain the politics, sociological aspects, and make something that packages all of that without making it political because that is how the conversation always starts now.”

With many award-winning projects under his belt and captivating films in production, certain common themes seem to run through the stories Kicklighter likes to tell.

“I’m always drawn to stories about loss and identity,” said Kicklighter. “My father died when I was twelve very unexpectedly. He had one of the first American cases of SARS, the CDC hypothesized, which has been an interesting toolkit to draw on this past year and a half. For me, those stories that say something about who we are and how we get there, and how loss in its different forms informs that, has always been something that’s drawn me, because of my own personal narrative. I believe that directing is very much about pulling from experiences and people and moments in your life that you draw upon from different moments to create material and connect with an audience.”



I recently had the good fortune to interview director **James Kicklighter** where we had a long discussion covering a modicum of subjects ranging from art, artists, films, filmmaking techniques, editing, and every other avenue underneath the vast umbrella of the arts. Namely, we discussed his most recent feature documentary, *The Sound of Identity*, and its principal subject, **Lucia Lucas**, the first transgender woman to headline a major opera production – but in so many ways, that’s just scratching the surface. After a couple of hours and a transcript clocking in over a dozen pages, I came to appreciate the film more than I had the first two times I had watched it. Because what I saw was an artist with a compassionate and intelligent vision that is both disciplined and inquisitive.



The Sound of Identity charts the journey of its subject without exploiting or dwelling on the transition-related nature of the story; it benefits from the very essence of the story and consciously avoiding sensationalism or cultural glad-handing. As a result, it’s a documentary with crisp execution, technical assertion, and a tendency for inspiration.



Interview With James Kicklighter Director Of THE SOUND OF IDENTITY



How much of this was discovered in post-production and editing, and you do this remarkable job of keeping all these plates spinning in the air. How much was delivered in post, and what was the initial jumping-off point?

James Kicklighter: That's an extremely fair question; I can truthfully say that each of those spinning plates was thought about in production. I felt very strongly that this film had a couple of different narrative elements, that if I played it the right way, it would all converge into a singular story. Because I think that the challenge in making a film that has a couple of different layers to it, has a couple of different storylines to it, is that one has to be clear for the viewer, because you have to be sure that you have to make sure that you're taking them through each of those spinning plates, right?



I love the transferral of time from Tobias and Lucia; it's a very beautiful friendship; you really get the feeling that these two people have this very profound understanding, and the personalities bump a little — in the best possible way.

James Kicklighter: We shot that scene for three-and-a-half hours, but there's only seven minutes of it in the film. There comes to a point when you shoot something long enough in documentaries, where I believe the subject forgets they're being filmed.

Then, you're able to capture authentic moments that feel like they should be in a scripted film. Although it's not scripted, it feels like it's a written piece of dialogue, which is something that I wanted to accomplish with *The Sound of Identity*. I wanted it to feel like a narrative film, because I thought that was also emulating the heightened world of opera.

There's the fly-on-the-wall, and the more participatory director. I think what you get with moments like that, when for instance, you're a fly on the wall with the performers, it's a different dichotomy.

James Kicklighter: You're very fortunate as a director when working with performers, because you know they're engaging with the screen. I think the better question is — are they being truthful because they know how to act? How do you not reveal to them what your intentions are, so they're not performing for the camera? Because if I let either of those cards go, I'm not directing a documentary film anymore.

Elements of Madness

Director James Kicklighter's "The Sound of Identity" is the rare documentary which delicately shifts the audience away from the expected.



Something which helps create the atmosphere of drama amid real life stressors is how well Kicklighter incorporates Mozart's music into the production. It serves as a lovely through line, underscoring everything from talking head interviews set up in non-traditional places (like the stage of the Tulsa Opera, inside an antique store, in a restaurant), to public appearances, play rehearsals, and private moments. There is little about *The Sound of Identity* which requires any kind of false drama, so let's be clear that the music does not do this in the slightest. Instead, it just makes the ordinary struggles feel a tad more extraordinary. It's a testament to Kicklighter's editing that there's little that feels false or put-on throughout the documentary. In fact, the closer the film gets to show night, the more things fall away and become clear. *The Sound of Identity* reveals itself as the rare documentary which evolves as it goes, taking the audience on a journey of the soul, uncovered piece by piece, moment by moment, conversation by conversation.



THE SOUND OF IDENTITY



By Christopher Reed / June 2, 2021 / 0 Comments



Ultimately, representation matters, as Lucas succinctly states, and so at the very least she has to demonstrate that her hiring is as much about her talent as about her trans identity. We hear plenty of her singing, and she makes a fine Don Giovanni. Not only that, but her casting is in many ways perfect, given the frequent gender fluidity of opera (as per *The New York Times'* Michael Cooper, also in the movie), with the many "trouser roles" (women playing men) throughout its history. Plus, as the choreographer and director of the show, Denni Sayers, puts it, Don Giovanni, himself, is a master of disguise, changing how he looks and acts, throughout. Lucas may just know a thing or two about the duality of self-presentation.

By the end, though the quality of the final performances remains important, it's really the journey to them that counts. We meet so many complex individuals, including those who mean well but express themselves clumsily, and learn great lessons from all. Major kudos also need to go to Jonathan Pope ([The Social Dilemma](#)), Kicklighter's cinematographer, who delivers stunning images, one after another. Everything comes together for a lovely celebration of the human spirit and the joyous variety of the human experience. Plus, there's some wonderful Mozart music sprinkled on top. What could be better?

PIPELINE

ARTISTS

A Pure Moment: James Kicklighter and "The Sound of Identity"

01 June 2021

[Jeanne Veillette Bowerman](#)

[# Read](#) [# Interview](#) [# The District](#)

The artist. Often misunderstood, and whose journey is rarely appreciated.

At first glance, one may assume the documentary *The Sound of Identity* will be a deep dive into the trans world of opera from the vantage point of [Lucia Lucas](#)—the first trans opera singer in the world to play the role of Don Giovanni. But instead of a singular view, director [James Kicklighter](#) exposes a rich perspective of a complex woman with an untraditional path, who strives to move people with her performances—to evoke emotion.

Being trans is the B story. Lucia's heart is the focus.

I've interviewed many artists and watched countless films, but this one is ... indescribable. It's a profoundly important documentary—dare I say, the most life-altering film experience I've had in years. I cried. I even teared up when I began speaking with James. I double-dog dare you to watch this film and not feel.

"In any opera there's an emotional core—if we can find what that is, it's timeless." – Lucia Lucas

Opera isn't exactly a popping medium. But James manages to present it in a way that makes any artist relate to the struggles of doing what they love. When Lucia belts her stunning baritone voice, we quickly forget the sounds are coming from anyone other than a remarkable opera singer. We're mesmerized.

PIPELINE

ARTISTS

Digging through endless footage, continuing to ask himself what the core of the story is, James' first cut was three hours.

“The first challenge was structuring everything around widening stages. The first act, Lucia is on the smallest stage. The second act, the stage is slightly bigger. And the third is the big stage. I structured each interview and each line of questioning for her in the hopes that we would never go back to any of those smaller stages. This storytelling choice emulates something about her career—that life imitating art thing. We start out on a small stage, and if we're successful, it gets bigger, and bigger, and bigger. That was a risk I took in the filming process—if I needed something from interview one or two for interview three, that ruins that entire structure. If it didn't work out, I had no one to blame but myself. But the risk was worth it.



James Kicklighter and Lucia Lucas - The Sound of Identity, directed by James Kicklighter

OPERA WIRE



Behind the Scenes, Interviews

Q & A: Director James Kicklighter His Film “The Sound of Identity”

<https://operawire.com/q-a-director-james-kicklighter-on-his-film-the-sound-of-identity/>

Kicklighter was 18 when he began his career as a filmmaker. To date, he has credits as a producer and director for nine films, four of which are documentaries. His subjects range from cancer to political polarization in the U.S. to the fate of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, one of the United State’s most respected newspapers. Kicklighter can now add the story of opera’s first transgender baritone to his filmography.

Raised in a small Georgia village with a population of 123, there were few chances to attend live opera theater, so Kicklighter knew little about the art before arriving in Tulsa to begin shooting the film. Jumping headfirst into the world of opera was daunting, he said, but he was reassured by many that knowledge of the art form grows from experience, as well as by being around opera people. The director was a quick study, as there is little hint in the film that he had no exposure working within the opera world until he was chosen to direct “The Sound of Identity.” His newfound understanding was also on display during our conversation. It was clear that Kicklighter “got” opera, but the story isn’t about opera per se; it’s first and foremost about the extraordinary person named [Lucia Lucas](#).

OW: What were some of the more challenging aspects of filming a documentary about an opera singer?

JK: The first thing I needed to do was to make sure that Lucia felt comfortable with me and that she felt comfortable with me telling her story.

The other piece was making sure that I wasn’t getting in the way of her or the opera company as they worked to deliver their performance. That’s the tricky thing about doing this sort of film. On one hand, you need to have total access to tell a complete story, while on the other, they’re preparing for a live performance. You can’t get in the way of that. We set a very specific schedule: we’re going to do interviews on these days, we’re going to shoot B roll on these days and everyone was on the same page. I tried to strip our crew down to the smallest group we could to make sure that we were kind of flies on the wall while we let them get their work done.

The Independent Critic

essays and reviews for filmmakers and writers



As a longtime fan of James Kicklighter's work, I've become accustomed to the quality independent motion pictures he creates seemingly regardless of type or genre. Yet, I must confess I'd likely never have expected such a fine work as is *The Sound of Identity*, a touching and beautifully constructed documentary feature telling the story of the rather magnificent Lucia Lucas, an opera singer born in America finding her fame in Europe who has arrived stateside, in Oklahoma no less, to become the first transgender woman to perform as Don Giovanni in a professional opera.

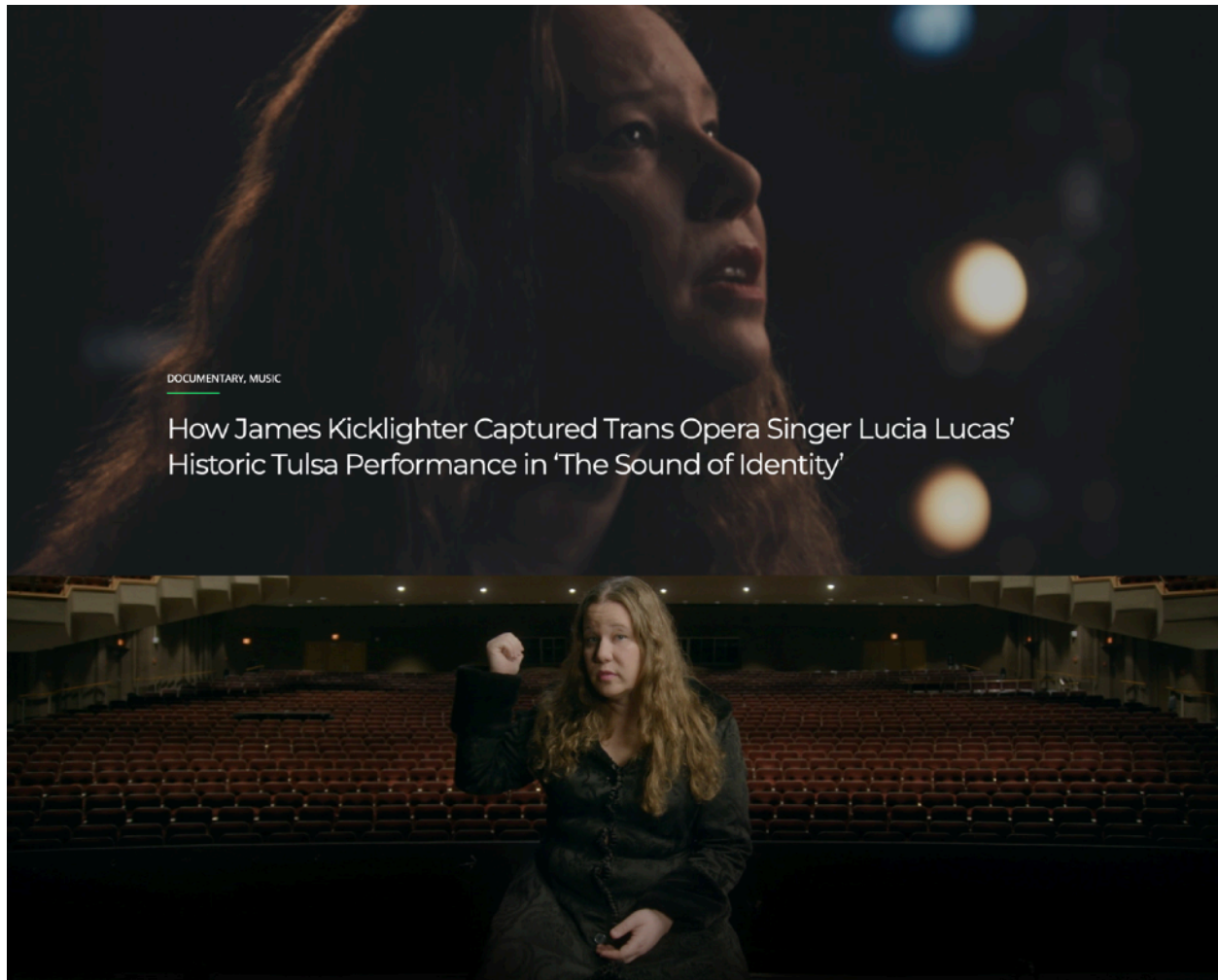
Ever.

Produced by Emmy Award-winning producers Russ Kirkpatrick and Andy Kinslow and executive producer Josh Bachove (*Minari*, *The Nowhere Inn*, *The Little Hours*), *The Sound of Identity* is, perhaps, the film that will, or at least should, make Kicklighter the household name he always should have been.

From the moment one meets Lucia, one is enthralled by her presence, a magnificent baritone voice and illuminating stage presence matched by the kind of self-confidence one is seldom blessed to see by transgender portrayals in cinema. From outing herself with family in such a way that practically demanded acceptance or absence to a sort of bewildered confidence in presenting her talent in one of the reddest states in the United States, Lucia Lucas is simply extraordinary and you can't help but feel like the film's 90-minute running time flies by way too quickly.

While the indie fest scene is currently in chaos thanks to COVID-19, *The Sound of Identity* has already captured the 2020 OUTShine Film Festival's Programmers Award for Excellence and is no doubt destined for even greater successes.

Indeed, *The Sound of Identity* is a work of wonder.



Following the behind the scene preparations for what would be a historic performance of the Tulsa Opera, [James Kicklighter](#) (who last joined us with Atlanta Journal doc [Digital Edition](#)) shadows baritone opera singer [Lucia Lucas](#) as she takes on the lead role of *Don Giovanni* – the first time in the U.S. that a transgender woman has performed the role in a professional opera. The resulting documentary feature [The Sound of Identity](#) intimately explores the creative process through identity in our personal and professional lives and asks us to question the continued existence of archaic social barriers. We spoke to Kicklighter about quickly orientating himself in the ways of the operatic world while meeting the responsibility filmmakers have to evolve the depiction of transgender individuals on screen.



We hear Lucia sing before we hear her speak which feels like a direct challenge to audience expectations and a clear signpost for what follows in the documentary.

I'm glad that you noticed this! It was a very intentional directorial decision. When producer Russ Kirkpatrick first pitched the idea to me, that was the first spark that lit the fuse for me. In society, whether we like to admit it or not, we assign gender attributes to individuals based on the pitch of their voice. Have you ever gotten a phone call from a stranger who misgendered you? Someone that says, "sir" or "ma'am" when they didn't intend to do so? As most of us aren't opera singers, I think that most of us have experienced something like that in our life. Though voice does not have a gender, society assigns gender to voice.



Through opening the film with Lucia's voice — before you even see her, in fact — the viewer hopefully goes through a few mental gymnastics:

Oh, wow! That's a big, booming baritone.

Oh, gosh! That's not a man, it's a woman!

Uh, huh, when she talks, she doesn't sound like that at all?

In doing so, I wanted the viewer to challenge their own conceptions of voice, and in turn, gender identity. In skipping past the topic of transition, I was making a conscious choice not to otherize Lucia, presenting her as a regular old person with an extraordinary talent. How does Lucia being trans impact you personally? It doesn't.

Do you share the same values as your neighbor? That's 'The American Question'



People exist now in their own bubbles of isolation, where it's much easier for folks to peg others as enemies because "we're only listening to things, finding things and sharing things that only substantiate what we already believe," Kicklighter said.

To break out of these bubbles, the duo believe, the majority of Americans need to agree and adhere to a baseline of values they think are the same as those of their neighbors.

"The American Question" is that wake-up call to the country, said Seemann — a "cautionary tale" to the masses to not regress, but to progress. Kicklighter and Seemann use values as the foundation that joins individuals and community together. Less individual mindset, more connection. Less division, more community.



No Film School



In this video, Film Courage offers up an answer in an interview with filmmaker [James Kicklighter](#), who shares some indispensable knowledge about the harsh truths about what it means to be cut out for a career in filmmaking.

Kicklighter makes four crucial points about the differences between "strong" and "weak" filmmakers (a little Darwinian for my taste, but I digress) that will help put your career into perspective:

Is filmmaking a long-term or short-term thing for you?

This is one of the best points Kicklighter talks about, namely because it's a little obscure. If you're working on a project right now, do you know what your next is going to be? If your answer is yes, have you determined how your current project will help you make your next one? This seemingly simple question will open your eyes to the difference between filmmakers who are hobby-minded and those that are career-minded.



WORTH WATCHING

Watch: Male Stripper Short 'Angel of Anywhere' by James Kicklighter

by Alex Billington
August 14, 2018
Source: Vimeo



"I am so not this girl, I never do this." Don't be turned off by the headline, this is a very impressive dramatic short film. ***Angel of Anywhere*** is an award-winning short directed by **James Kicklighter** that has been playing at festivals this year. The story is about an empathetic stripper who chats with his clients and helps them work through their problems. It goes to some very deep, personal places, with a very intelligent script. *Angel of Anywhere* stars **Briana Evigan** as Michelle, **Ser'Darius Blain** as Brian, **David A. Gregory** as D.C., plus **Nihan Gur**, **Adam Carr**, **Krystal Conway**, and **Axel Roldos**. It's always great to see a story that challenges us to rethink our initial judgments, and listen more to each other. Definitely worth a watch.

JEANBOOKNERD



James Kicklighter on the Red Carpet with JBN Journalist, Rachel Litfin.



James Kicklighter on the Red Carpet at HollyShorts.

Angel Of Anywhere (2017) Short Film Review

Compelling short film about a mysterious fixer working at a strip club.



By David Duprey — On Sep 7, 2017



Angel of Anywhere is a 2017 short film about an empathetic stripper who plays therapist to the many damaged clientele and co-workers who frequent the popular Anywhere Bar.

There's quite a bit of symbolism tucked inside the short runtime of James Kicklighter's latest film *Angel of Anywhere*, a 16-minute, well-made short that hides a greater message about human relationships behind the skin of an all-male strip club. While the setting isn't exactly a new one of course, it's far less about the stage show or even the relationships of the dancers, but rather the impact of one man who serves importance in ways even he's not entirely aware of.

Omeleto



This short drama, crafted by director James Kicklighter and writers Kate Murdoch and Casey Nelson, is initially about surfaces: about the gap between them and reality, and about how the expectations we create from surfaces often don't do justice to what's underneath.

Though the environs of the Anywhere Bar are shot with a luminous, almost glamorously slick lighting and sleek camerawork, the film isn't a thriller or neo-noir. Instead, it privileges compassion over prurience, and reveals itself to be a warmhearted story about finding empathy and understanding in unexpected places.

One of the strengths of "Angel of Anywhere" is how it creates an atmosphere around the Anywhere Bar, endowing it with an almost otherworldly aura that gives its clients and the audience a sense that the rules of daytime lives don't apply and anything can happen. The last thing that Anywhere's patrons expect, though, is an epiphany about life and self.

Angel gets his own epiphany with the film's zinger of an ending, which may push him to move onto a new arena to practice his skills as a counselor and therapist. But the audience gets the sense that wherever he ends up, he'll put as much care and compassion into the world as he did at the Anywhere Bar -- showing how anyone can make a difference in the world, no matter who they are or what they do.

THE *Hollywood* REPORTER

‘All My Children’s’ Alicia Minshew Nabs Lead in ‘Desires of the Heart’ (Exclusive)

The film will begin production in Savannah, Georgia, on Monday before moving to India.



All My Children star **Alicia Minshew** will play the lead in the film *Desires of the Heart*, which began production in Savannah, GA, on Monday.

The actress, who has been nominated for two Daytime Emmys for her role as Kendall Hart on the soap, will play Madeline, an artist who lives in Georgia and catches the eye of a psychiatrist (**Val Lauren**) visiting from India. However, as the duo begin to develop a relationship, the psychiatrist is sent home to India to marry a woman chosen for him by his parents.

From executive producer **Solila Parida** (*Vishkanya*), *Desires of the Heart* is directed by **James Kicklighter** (*Followed, The Car Wash*) and co-directed in India by **Rajesh Rathi** (*Chase*). The production will later move to India after filming in Georgia.

FILM THREAT



The timing isn't the greatest for psychiatrist Kris Sharma (Val Lauren) and artist Madeline (Alicia Minshew), who meet on the cusp of Kris moving from Savannah, Georgia out to Seattle to start his own practice. Still, they indulge in the building of a relationship together, connecting in a way that seems timeless and fated. That is, until Kris gets a call from his family in India, summoning him back to be wed to the woman he was promised to by his parents.

Reluctantly, Kris returns to India to sort out the predicament, leaving his burgeoning relationship with Madeline on indefinite hold. As he navigates the culture and traditions of home, Kris is simultaneously being haunted by the vision of a strange woman. The mystery of who this woman is, and what she has to do with Kris' past, and potential future, becomes one more thing for Kris to work out before he can finally make a life for himself.

James Kicklighter and Rajesh K. Rathi's global *Desires of the Heart* is a study in many different directions. Depending on how interested you are in indulging, you could walk with this one alongside the subjects of fate, reincarnation, tradition, art, relationships and even self-sufficiency. What could easily have been a simple romantic tale of Kris and Madeline reveals itself to be much grander.

For instance, early on it would not be outside the realm of sense to think that you're going to spend the rest of the film with Kris and Madeline as equal protagonists, and their relationship as the main core. This is both true and false, as the film becomes predominantly Kris' story as he travels to India to sort his life out. Without Madeline, however, maybe he never second-guesses his life, and perhaps other developments are never set into motion. Then again, maybe this personal growth was always coming.

In that way, the film becomes the tale of Kris, but even that is eventually turned on its ear, as his tale is Madeline's tale, and yet both their stories are also not necessarily their own. Confused? I apologize for not being terribly detailed in explaining why I feel that way about the narrative, but I don't wish to spoil anyone's enjoyment of the more surprising elements of the story. I'll just say that the film is both a study in individuality and personal choice, and contradictorily a fable of fate.

The cinematography in the film matches its narrative's expansive ambitions with gorgeous visions that turn both Georgia and India into almost permanent states of postcard-friendly imagery. The quality scenery is matched by the attractiveness of the leads, Val Lauren and Alicia Minshew, who offer up another element to enjoy, if you're not impressed in any other way. Of course, they're not just good-looking humans with no acting chops, and they succeed in their performances, keeping a tale that can be somewhat fantastical grounded in a sense of reality.

UK FILM REVIEW

Desires of the Heart blends tradition and Indian [#mysticism](#) with the contemporary as it explores true love, in this utterly gorgeous, supernaturally inflected mystery-romance from writer/director James Kicklighter.

For Dr Kris Sharma, life in Savannah, Georgia, couldn't be further from that of the life he left in India. Swapping out the old customs expected of him by his family and religion, for the freedom afforded by western society. And, as a successful psychiatrist who's about to open his own practice in Seattle, it simply couldn't be better. But then a spanner is thrown into the works of Kris' life, and he's taken out of his comfort zone when he meets Madeline, a beautiful young artist – who's fascinated by Indian culture – and begins to fall in love. A problem made infinitely worse when he receives a phone call from his family in India beckoning him back home for his arranged marriage.

Both Val Lauren and Alicia Minshew give absolutely stellar performances in the lead roles of Kris and Madeline, respectively. I particularly loved how concisely, yet subtly, the film accented the contrasting qualities of the grounded, Kris and more spiritual, Madeline: this isn't a match-up which should work, these are both divergent personalities. But – through the excellent script and character writing, and incredibly strong chemistry between both Lauren and Minshew – the film does superb work at getting us to believe in these characters and the strange allure they clearly have for one another.

The rest of the cast is also magnificent, I have no complaints about anything here. Although I do feel special mention should also go to Gulshan Grover for his portrayal of Kris' brother, Pradeep; he may have only had limited screen time, but he stole the show in every scene, and his were some of the best of the film.

The world these characters inhabit is also beautifully imagined and captured. [#TimGill's](#) remarkable camerawork flawlessly and effortlessly flaunts the magnificence of both India and the US' southern city of Savannah: crystal clear visuals and picturesque framing ensures the grandeur of the old plantation mansion and vibrant colours – which come mostly from [#GwenTaylor's](#) remarkable [#costumedesign](#) – and stunning night-time scenes in India are able to be fully appreciated for what they are – a stunning achievement of [#cinematography](#).

Desires of the Heart begins, in many ways, like your typically idealistic romance movie, and it's easy to write it off as such. But you'd be a fool to do so. This faux saccharine surface belies a superbly written and wonderfully understated [#supernatural #mystery](#), which really only takes off at around the halfway point of the film. And it's where the film really comes into its own.



Hollywood vs. Bollywood: An Interview With Filmmaker James Kicklighter

Kicklighter's most recent film, *Desires of the Heart* explores facets of two cultures. It is the story of Dr. Kris Sharma (portrayed by Val Lauren), a psychiatrist from India practicing in Savannah, Ga., where he meets Madeline (Alicia Minshew), a local artist with a mysterious past. But as their relationship begins to blossom in America, Kris is summoned home by his brother, Pradeep (Gulshan Grover) to marry the woman chosen by his parents.

Kicklighter believes that as the world continues to grow closer, it is the homogenization of culture that is the most negative aspect of globalization.

During the course of shooting part of the film in India, Kicklighter and his team were in Rajasthan, in the province closest to Pakistan. As he recalls, "I remember seeing a large poster of Joseph Gordon-Levitt's film *Looper* at the movie theater right in front of the market. There were cows sitting in the road while dust flew up from the stores. The building had its own local flavor, designed like the other area buildings."

He saw this in stark contrast to the megaplex in New Delhi, which was just like any other in the U.S., next to "Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf, Hard Rock Cafe, Gucci, among every other global brand you can imagine."

What may be more pervasive are the retail malls which echo a global influence of American power, and thus, as Kicklighter sees it, "the power of Hollywood." The question may not be one of Bollywood mimicking Hollywood, but a global cinema usurping the local.

"I fear that the days of the small, local theater in Rajasthan, even though they carry American movies, are soon to be in the past."



Director James Kicklighter contacted me a while back about this film and was nice enough to let me check it out, and I'm so glad I did. Though this film could easily be lumped in with other zombie films, it's an entirely new and refreshing take on the zombie genre. Though it might take some work to seek this one out, it's definitely worth the effort.

The concept of **FOLLOWED** comes from a short story by Will McIntosh. Unlike most cinematic zombies, the zombies in **FOLLOWED** don't have the annoying tendency to eat brains. They actually are pretty pleasant. They just kind of appear from nowhere, following the humans slowly, and that's about it. The thought of a race or species of human that do nothing but wander around and occasionally follow humans slowly is both a new and haunting one. One particular man finds himself followed by a little zombie girl and does everything he can to avoid her, but she relentlessly continues to show up everywhere he goes. Though the concept of zombies is always a gruesome one, **FOLLOWED** turns out to be a sweet and downright heartwarming story.



Directed with a delicate and gentle hand, **FOLLOWED** is probably the most unexpected horror surprise I've seen in quite a while. The final moments, set to a song called "Glory" by Essie Jane, will warm even the coldest and deadest of hearts. I don't know if **FOLLOWED** is ever going to be a feature film, but it certainly has enough going for it to warrant one. As is, **FOLLOWED** is worth getting behind. It's making its way around festivals at the moment (specifically Dragon*Con, the Rome International Film Festival, and Central Florida Film Festival -- all in September) and you can find out more about it and where and when the film will be playing [here](#) and [here](#).

MAGAZINE Macon

by **candice dyer**

photography by **maryann bates**

with a Camera

conscience

Filmmaker's art comes from the heart

While shooting a movie in Ethiopia, James Kicklighter wandered alone at dawn into some high grass, hoping to film the sort of molten, birth-of-creation sunrise that symbolizes Africa.

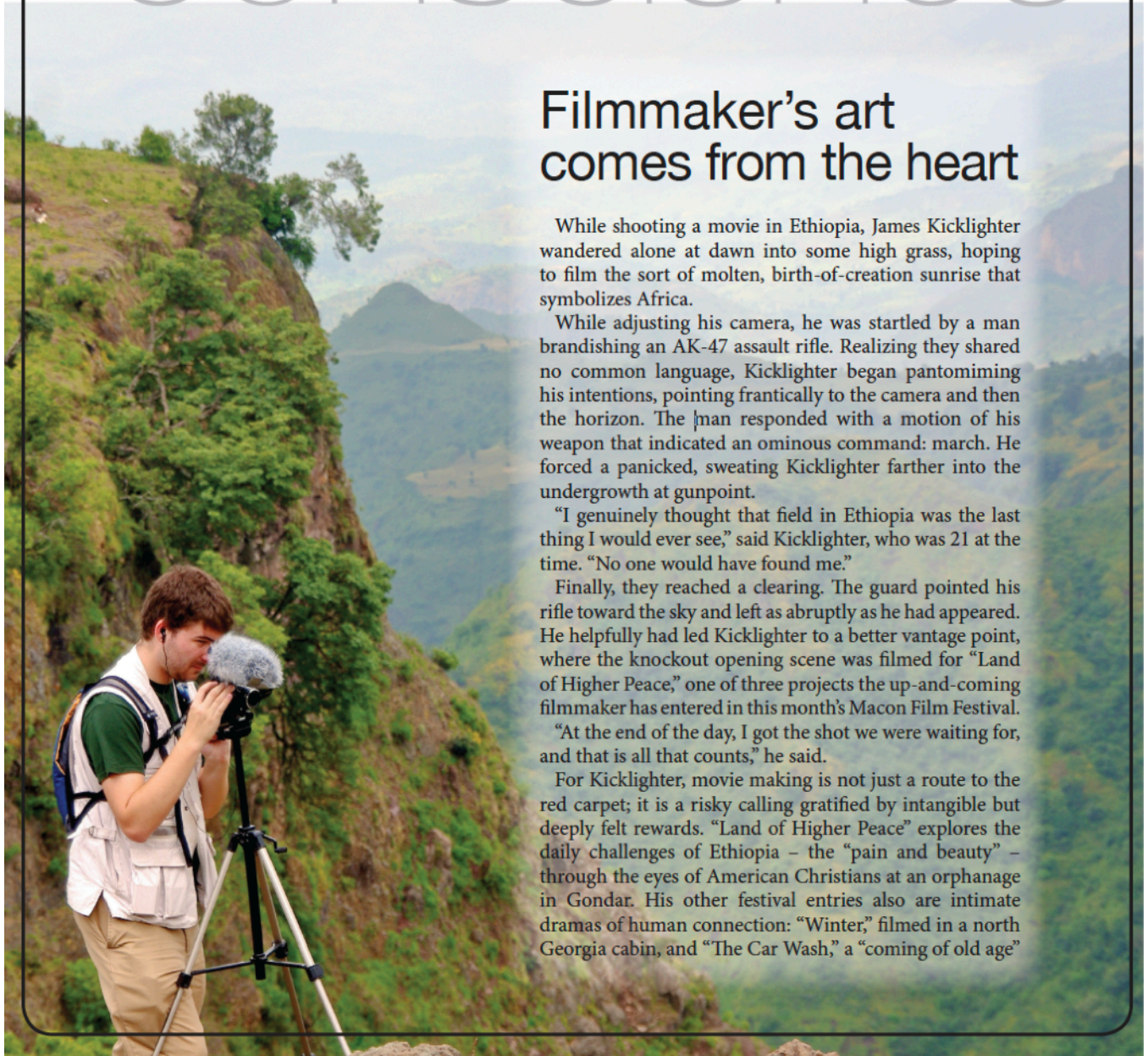
While adjusting his camera, he was startled by a man brandishing an AK-47 assault rifle. Realizing they shared no common language, Kicklighter began pantomiming his intentions, pointing frantically to the camera and then the horizon. The man responded with a motion of his weapon that indicated an ominous command: march. He forced a panicked, sweating Kicklighter farther into the undergrowth at gunpoint.

"I genuinely thought that field in Ethiopia was the last thing I would ever see," said Kicklighter, who was 21 at the time. "No one would have found me."

Finally, they reached a clearing. The guard pointed his rifle toward the sky and left as abruptly as he had appeared. He helpfully had led Kicklighter to a better vantage point, where the knockout opening scene was filmed for "Land of Higher Peace," one of three projects the up-and-coming filmmaker has entered in this month's Macon Film Festival.

"At the end of the day, I got the shot we were waiting for, and that is all that counts," he said.

For Kicklighter, movie making is not just a route to the red carpet; it is a risky calling gratified by intangible but deeply felt rewards. "Land of Higher Peace" explores the daily challenges of Ethiopia – the "pain and beauty" – through the eyes of American Christians at an orphanage in Gondar. His other festival entries also are intimate dramas of human connection: "Winter," filmed in a north Georgia cabin, and "The Car Wash," a "coming of old age"



MAGAZINE Macon

(1) James Kicklighter instructs child actor Joshua Tweedy and zombie extras in the opening scene of the short film "Followed," which was shot here in Macon in December. This scene took place in Washington Park. (2) Kicklighter gives direction to lead actor Erryn Arkin and actress Sylvia Boykin in a scene shot at the So Chi Gallery. (3) Kicklighter reviews with director of photography Jason Winn on a scene shot at Mercer University. (4) From left, Kicklighter, Kasey Ray-Stokes, child actress Abigail de los Reyes, Abigail's dad Bruce Reyes-Chow, Mark Ezra Stokes and Rachel Williams view on a monitor a scene previously shot at the Terminal Station.

story starring grande dame Edith Ivey, who appeared in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." (During filming, Ivey's affecting monologues about mortality and loneliness left even the well-rehearsed crew in tears.)

"There's nothing wrong with making a popcorn flick for pure entertainment," Kicklighter said, "but film is such a powerful medium that I think there's a responsibility there to go a step further and interact with the audience, to ask questions that

make viewers evaluate their own lives and what is really important. I don't have the answers, but I like to use strong storytelling to pose questions, with the hope that viewers will seek out their own answers. I received an e-mail from a lady in Pennsylvania telling me that she had just watched 'The Car

Wash' and for the first time felt she wasn't alone. Just that one message made that entire project worthwhile."

Kicklighter, a 22-year-old from Bellville, is inevitably tagged as a prodigy, wunderkind and lovable "old soul," with eight movies to his credit, more in the works and a shelf of awards from indie film festivals and arts organizations around the world. He established JamesWorks Entertainment at 16 with the mission "to create socially conscious films that engage our audiences through new media to action in their personal lives, communities and around the globe." So, in a Tinseltown yearbook, he might be voted "least likely to appear in the credits of a Michael Bay schlockbuster." Kicklighter's visions of "pain and beauty" do not involve the shoot-'em-up car chases, breast-implant buffets and other cheap effects that define big-budget American cinema. Granted, his most recent film, "Followed," which was shot in Macon, features zombies, but it may be his most ambitious "message movie" to date, redefining horror in terms of everyday guilt. These undead do not eat brains; they go deeper, tugging balefully at your conscience, haunting you for lapses in social responsibility, for sins of omission.

"The zombies represent all of the invisible people in our lives we should care about – the homeless person under the bridge, kids in a sweatshop – but don't," he said. "At best, we throw money at the problem, but we don't stop to touch these people, to feel them, to bring them back into the community. One of the zombies in 'Followed' is wearing shoes made of plastic water bottles because we'd seen a child in Ethiopia wearing those, scrounged from the trash. So we weren't trying to be campy or cheesy; we're using zombies to illustrate real social divisions."



Macon Film Festival

- Feb. 17 - 20
- Downtown at various venues
- www.maconfilmfestival.com

Three of James Kicklighter's works will be featured.

PAGE 73

Read more about the festival.

South



LIVE

WRITER/DIRECTOR JAMES KICKLIGHTER IS

CALLING THE SHOTS

"FILM'S NOT JUST ABOUT WHAT WE PUT ON THE SCREEN," SAYS THE CONSCIENTIOUS FILMMAKER. "IT'S ABOUT THE CATERING, THE HOTELS, THE TRANSPORTATION; IT'S ABOUT LOGISTICS. IT'S ABOUT ALL OF THE SMALLER THINGS THAT BECOME MUCH BIGGER THINGS. I FEEL LIKE ANYTIME I CAN SHOOT SOMETHING HERE, THAT IS A WAY FOR ME TO GIVE BACK TO THE COMMUNITIES THAT I LOVE."

GEORGIA native James Kicklighter is a lot like the boy next door. Smart and well-spoken, he is close with his family, loves spending time with friends and has a tremendous work ethic. His work just happens to be as a globe-trotting writer and director.

Kicklighter's current project is a feature film about famed Georgia Southern coach Erk Russell, slated for national release in late 2014.

"We want to make sure it's done right," says Kicklighter, a GSU alum. "One of my old professors told me, 'James, you know that professors can modify grades for up to seven years after one graduates.' If I don't get it exactly right, I'm probably not going to have a college diploma anymore!"

He'll get it right. At 25, Kicklighter's career has taken him around the world. He started his production company at age 16 and has made movies in places as far-flung as India and Italy. Although he splits his time between Los Angeles and Savannah, Kicklighter's favorite location is the great state of Georgia.

"Film's not just about what we put on the screen," says the conscientious filmmaker. "It's about the catering, the hotels, the transportation; it's about logistics. It's about all of the smaller things that become much bigger things. I feel like anytime I can shoot something here, that is a way for me to give back to the communities that I love."

See Kicklighter's work at jameskicklighter.com.

—Kristen Smith



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