

Press Reviews

INSIDE AMERICA

SXSW 2011

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An American Education

A former exchange student reexamines her trial by fire in Brownsville

BY JOE O'CONNELL, FRI., MARCH 11, 2011

At 17, Barbara Eder was far from her Austrian home, living as a foreign exchange student with a Brownsville, Texas, family that viewed her as free labor. One day when she didn't clean the house at 5am, they tossed her luggage and clothes into the street. A desperate Eder moved in with friends from Hanna High School. "I stayed one week in my Mexican friend's household, the other week at the foster home where my friend stayed, the next week in a very rich house, the other week at a house where a gang used to hang out," she says.

That was 1995. Fast-forward to 2011 and Eder's film, *Inside America*, is about to have its U.S. premiere. The film follows six diverse students who are much like the teens whose couches she slept on years ago.

"It is important to me that people know that I was not only watching and observing but also really living within these households and lives which I am describing in *Inside America*," she says.



Perhaps the reality of the film's inspiration also led to its unique style. At first glance a straight-on documentary, it morphs, closes in, and reveals itself to be a fiction of the Cassavetes school (Eder also counts Larry Clark, Gus Van Sant, and Richard Linklater as major influences). "I wanted to make people see the characters of the movie from a most realistic point of view," she says. "I thought that starting with rather documentary scenes would have a very strong impact on credibility of the characters and the circumstances they are within."

Eder spent months casting the film with mostly nonactors who were essentially portraying themselves – including gang members who were sometimes high during filming. "I wanted to find actors who are more or less what they present in the movie," she says. "So for the part of the beauty queen, I was really looking for someone who would take part in beauty competitions. For the part of the gang guy, I wanted to find a real gang guy. For the cop, I was looking for a real cop. Half a year before shooting, I went to Brownsville to find my characters. I would hang out at the high school, talk to students, ask them about their lives and, most important, listen to what they had to say."

What Eder understood was the teenage desire to belong in a border town where Mexican illegals, rich Americans, and dispirited gang members try desperately to hang on. "It seemed to me that Brownsville kids only felt they were alive if they belonged to someone," she says. "And I always wondered if it was some search for identity. In my country it was so different because everyone wanted to be individual and was interested in all sorts of groups of people."

Everywhere she went there was a gun, something she had never encountered in Austria. **In many ways Eder's outsider perspective on Brownsville and the United States in general is what makes the film compelling.** Her filmic eye looks on with wonder at ROTC students obsessed with guns and even more so at the ever-present metal detector that guards the high school's front entrance. It's a viewpoint that may shock Americans forced to look at their world through fresh eyes. One of the film's nicer touches is a single handgun that passes through the hands of one character after another – always a threat waiting to explode in their lives.

The film offers some comic relief through a nerdy boy named Ricky who is forced to sell cookies door-to-door to fund a school trip. Eder admits the character is very much based on her own experiences but, more significantly, is at the heart of the film's underlying message about the dangers of teens trying to fit in.

"I know that in Brownsville people from Cameron Park would never hang out or talk with people from the country club," she says. "Same thing at school. A straight-A student would never hang out with the cookie-selling Ricky. The movie gives a chance to see the struggles of different groups of citizens of Brownsville and at the same time gives you the chance to reflect and think about your own."

10 SXSW'11 Films We've Seen and Highly Recommend

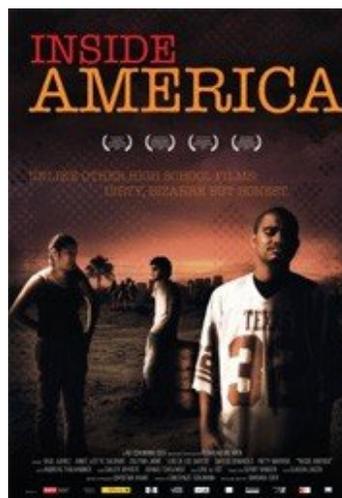
By Erik Childress

Posted Mar 9th 2011 10:00PM

With over 120 films to choose from in just nine days at the 2011 South by Southwest Film Festival, even the most experienced planner will be unable to take in all of them. That's just simple math. Sometimes you just have to take a page from Neil ... Page: 'You have to discriminate. You choose things that are funny or mildly amusing.' So you can look over the SXSW catalog descriptions and make up your mind, or you can take the word of some trusted critics who have a heads-up and start from there.

'Inside America'

It was three years ago when I caught up with a popular Sundance documentary called 'American Teen' at the South by Southwest Film Festival. At the time it grabbed me as a rather introspective reality show focusing on the struggles and heartbreak of actual John Hughes archetypes as they prepared to leap from their final year at high school. Further viewings did not compliment the first as their problems downgraded from universal to insufferable – and I say that as a fellow Caucasian who grew up in the suburbs and didn't exactly have the best middle-school experience.



AG Schumann Eder

Now, along comes Barbara Eder's 'Inside America,' a narrative with a documentary feel that displaces the American Teens of the Midwest further south to the Mexican-American border and strikes a delicate equilibrium between the usual teenage issues and the cultural imbalance that makes complexion an issue.

The film begins with almost an anonymous feel towards the characters as we follow cliques and groups more than individuals. They do begin to break off on their own, though, from the boyfriend more desperate to hold onto a job than his girl, to the cheerleader dealing with the pressure of maintaining her status as a way out, to the sole white boy on campus who is almost doing for cookies what Jerry Renault did for chocolates. Looking at these kids without names also harkens back to certain John Hughes film, but unlike it or 'American Teen', their problems correlate to an uncertain future rather than mere growing pains. Eder does not treat them as types, however, and their stories never fall into the usual cliched outcomes.



SXSW Review: Inside America

By **Don Clinchy** on March 19, 2011 - 9:00am



The so-called American Dream is little more than a fantasy for many Americans. We're told to pursue an ideal life of finding a good job, owning a home, and living in a happy, stable family situation. But for much of America, this life isn't reality and never will be.

The impossible disconnect between the increasingly mythological American Dream and life's harsh realities is the underlying theme of *Inside America*, an unfiltered and unflinching look at the lives of six high school students in Brownsville, Texas. **A narrative film with the look and feel of a documentary, *Inside America* (which had its US premiere at SXSW on March 14 at the ACC Vimeo Theater) is jarringly, agonizingly realistic.**

Curiously, while *Inside America* was filmed in Brownsville, it's actually an Austrian movie. Austrian director and writer **Barbara Eder** spent a year as an exchange student in Brownsville in 1994; her experiences during that time gave her the idea for the movie. She and producer **Constanze Schumann** spent three weeks in Brownsville in 2006 hanging out with students and gathering material for the script. They returned in 2007 and managed to shoot a terrific movie with a crew of only five people, a miniscule budget (all the actors are volunteers), and limited access to the film's main set, Brownsville's Hanna High School.

Inside America is almost entirely character driven, with a minimal story arc. And what fascinating characters they are. Like everything else in the film, the six main characters are blends of fiction and reality. They're all uncannily realistic figures, and some parts of their back stories (including some of their names) are based on the real lives of the student actors who play them.

The characters are Aimee (**Aimeé Lizette Saldivar**), a wealthy, vain, drug addicted cheerleader; gang member Manni (**Raul Juarez**), who's desperately trying to straighten out his life; Carlos (**Carlos Benavides**), a blindly patriotic and entirely hypocritical ROTC student; quiet loner Ricky (**Luis De Los Santos**), who flirts with drug use and gang membership; Zuly (**Zuleyma Jaime**), a foster kid who is aging out of the foster care system with no place to go; and Patty (**Patty Barrera**), whose very traditional family wants her to find a stable man to marry, so she can start having babies.

Most of the six barely know each other and seldom venture outside their cliques, but they have more in common than they realize. Their main commonality is that their home lives are a mess, thanks to nonexistent, clueless, or horrendously bad parents. The worst among them is Aimee's mother, Carol (**Carolyn Sanchez**), a shallow, self-absorbed, manipulative monster who compensates for her own lack of self esteem via conspicuous consumption and forcing Aimee to compete in beauty contests. (And of course, losing is not an option. It's little wonder cocaine and

booze are Aimee's best friends.) Manni's parents are Carol's opposites; they're mostly AWOL. Although Carlos's parents are unseen, his bigoted, law-and-order worldview obviously stems from a very rigid home life.

Ricky's parents are unseen also, but it's a sure bet that if he's seeking friendship from gang members, something's terribly wrong at home. Zuly's foster parents are well meaning but often oblivious and distant; they're unconcerned about her fate when she turns 18 and is forced to move out. Patty may be better off than any of the others. Her completely old-school family -- ruled by a riotously funny pair of devoutly Catholic grandmothers -- may pester her to stop wearing t-shirts, be more ladylike and find a nice young man. But at least they care and are trying to help her.

Again, the plot is minimal, but *Inside America* is plenty captivating as we follow the students' daily lives. Although not all of them are poor, they all live in a dismal, disaffected world of drug and alcohol abuse, petty crime, violence and death. Compounding the nightmare is rampant bigotry toward Latinos.

As bad as the kids' home lives are, they find little refuge at school. Hanna High School -- itself a major character in the film -- is less like a school than a minimum security prison. The student's backpacks and purses are searched every time they enter the building, police roam the halls with drug-sniffing dogs, and random classroom drug searches happen daily. These are not the high school days many of us fondly remember.

In the midst of this police state-like atmosphere, the teachers try to maintain some semblance of a normal educational experience, with mixed success. They coach barely literate students with their reading, encourage kids to raise funds for choir trips and attempt to teach parenting skills by having the students act as surrogate parents of raw eggs. And every morning, the kids recite the Pledge of Allegiance to a nation that cares little about them and offers them almost no chance to escape.

Inside America captures all of this dystopian malaise with startling intimacy and relentless, howling anger. Eder's brilliant script disappears entirely into the film's gritty cinéma vérité sensibilities. Again, everything feels all too real; aside from a few elements that obviously aren't real (such as rampant drug use and a ghastly, bloody fight), if you didn't know the dialogue is scripted and the action staged, you'd swear *Inside America* is purely a documentary.

The actors -- all of whom are nonprofessionals in their debut roles -- are every bit as brilliant as the script. Like the rest of *Inside America*, the acting is fiercely realistic. The six principals are all standouts, giving wholly natural and amazingly nuanced performances that any seasoned professional would do well to emulate.

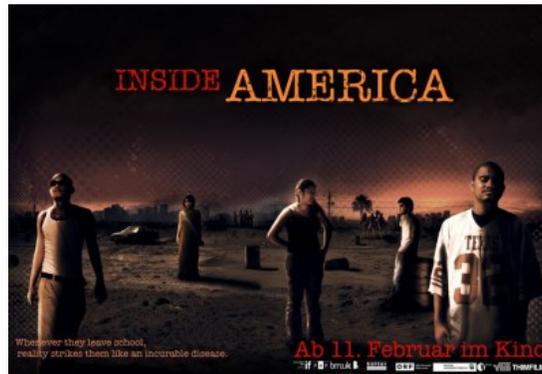
Fearless, frightening and stunningly well executed, *Inside America* should serve as a wake-up call to a nation that would rather turn a blind eye to the horrible worlds in which so many kids live. I hope it finds wide US distribution, for it is a film all of America needs to see.

<http://www.slackerwood.com/node/2177>



SXSW 2011 Review: "Inside America"

A gritty, raw and depressing look into the lives of several students whose life is far from perfect.



"Inside America" is one of the many films being showcased at SXSW 2011. I, however, am lucky enough to have seen the film before the festival run and therefore am able to write this review as a way to truly help promote independent cinema. "Inside America" tells the story of a group of high school students, who live near the Mexico border. While their backgrounds are different, they are all struggling to follow their hopes and to live the "American Dream." This film shows the struggles and offers a depressing yet realistic look at the lives of kids from a small town. It may not be pretty but "Inside America" offers a blunt and in your face look at people in our society today.

The film "Inside America" is an important film to watch. Like several independent films in the past, "Inside America" gives its audience a look into the lives of students from a small town. Now, while I grew up in a small suburb, I did not live in an area like the one shown in this film. This sort of town doesn't even exist near me, which made this film even more interesting to watch. As a film critic and film connoisseur, I always enjoy films that take risks and don't sink in to give it's audience, the warm and fuzzies. That is the job of most Hollywood films. Movies like this are made to tell a story and while they offer their own biased view on life, I think its an important one to acknowledge exists. I truly believe there are kids right now, going through this sort of life style that this film depicts.



The movie focuses on a loner, a group of kids involved in a gang, glamour and beauty obsessed cheerleaders, and even ROTC Students. This isn't your typical teen flick so don't expect lots of laughs and sex filled jokes. This is a realistic look at kids dealing with real life scenarios like living in poverty, drugs, popularity, gangs, immigration,

and struggling to just get by in America. There are several scenes in the film, which make you feel as though you are watching a documentary. One such scene is the as a gang fight scene. The violence was raw, gritty but most importantly real. When the scene happens near the end of the film, the audience is glued to the edge of their seats by the realism being shown on screen.

The overall message of the film was one that I don't think will win over the majority of the world but I don't think writer/director Barbara Eder cares about that. **She created a film for those who don't mind looking at the dark and realistic world that exists around our daily lives. This is a world that most of us will thankfully never see but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It's not a pretty portrait of America but the realistic truth that towns and more importantly, people like this do exist.** While the film is not a perfect film, it is a solid film for a first time director despite it's minor flaws. The budget on this film had to be almost non-existent and for what little resources the cast and crew had, they did a solid job with what they had.



In the end, "Inside America" probably won't reach a large audience anytime soon and that's just the hard reality behind it. That last sentence, however, proves the fact that film festivals are an important element in the Independent Film World. With festivals such as SXSW, movies like "Inside America" get a chance to find an audience, even if it is a small one. Independent films are the heart and soul of cinema as they are created for next to nothing and focus on telling a story. Films like this are made, not for money but as a work of art. It was made to share the directors vision and passion for film. This film is no different, its a powerful and realistic look into a world where moviegoers rarely venture. The film leaves its audience hating the world and upset by what they just witnessed. It goes to show you how human beings treat one another and it isn't a pretty picture. While depressing and even upsetting in it's conclusion, Barbara Eder created a film that ultimately paints a gritty, realistic, and dark portrait of life at Hanna High School.

MovieManMenzel's final rating for "Inside America" is a **solid 8 out of 10**. If you get a chance to see this film and are a fan of realistic films that don't paint that pretty picture, check out this flick!

<http://www.moviemanmenzel.com/2011reviews.php?category=14&post=14>



[SXSW Review] Inside America

Published on March 11, 2011 by John Fink



Inside America is a study of institutionalized behavior turning its lens to Brownsville, South Texas and to conditions that may produce either a homegrown terrorist or several individuals that are dangerous to themselves and others. The images present in a racially mixed community along the Texas-Mexico borderland are the antithesis of the American exceptionalism on display in the **Jersey Shore** and MTV's adaptation of the British sitcom *Skins*: this is what rouge capitalism producers – an immigration pool that came here to satisfy a demand to find jobs and opportunities shut out.

The institutions writer/director **Barbara Eder** studies are an educational system broken by security that interrupts an English class for a random backpack check, the schools ROTC, and foster families. It also encourages students to sell cookies for a fundraiser with a reward of a class field trip. Juxtaposing the legitimacy of this economy with an underground economy that develops, as immigration reform does not allow those here illegally to work legitimately. This film makes a strong case for the DREAM Act.

The frankness of Eder's lens is comparable to **Mark Street's** *Rockaway* – itself a hybrid documentary/narrative. Eder, working with non-actors edges towards an ethnographic crime thriller; thriller elements are in place but that it's not its intention. Remarkably the narrative doesn't contain the angst of a **Larry Clark** work, although cinematographer **Christian Haake** borrows as much from Clark's *Bully* and the **Darden brothers**.

Following six subjects including aspiring beauty queens (a women that resists to raise an "egg" – an assignment in home economics), drug distributors, would be army members subject to an institutional behavior all their own, a good kid who is forced to go door to door to sell cookies at a perverse school fundraiser, and two elderly Mexican women who try to fix up their granddaughter with a boy that works at Wal-Mart.



The flaw of a films made by outsiders to America are there is a certain hostility, we're a large country – the title *Inside America* seems overtly broad, however the tensions present aren't restricted to the Tex-Mex border.

The choice is curious: the actors are engaged in a political action without being politically engaged beyond the social dynamics of their neighborhood and community.

When a student bringing a gun to class retreats from the security line to hide it he's told: "don't do that – you look very suspicious when you do that" – is this a parable for concerns within an overall American security state – the borderland shared by United States and Mexico, the fear though as a cultural export the film portrays a less than flattering image of the United States, a critique made by films operating on the same socio-economic scale, such as *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*, which was made by an American.

Inside America is a sad and visually exciting. I just wish it was more specific about its geography, although this European funded production combats the popular images of Americans; it does take fair jabs at the American exceptionalism coded in our cultural exports.



<http://thefilmstage.com/2011/03/11/sxsw-review-inside-america/>



Inside America | Review

SXSW FILM 2011

By Don Simpson | March 12, 2011



Director: Barbara Eder

Writer: Barbara Eder

Starring: Patty Barrera, Carlos Benavides, Edward K. Bravo

Metal detectors welcome us to Hanna High School in Brownsville, Texas. On the other side of the threshold, we are greeted by police monitors and drug dogs in the hallways. Trust is not a virtue to be found in Hanna High School, the one thing that the rich and the poor students have in common (other than the American flag that they must pledge their allegiance to on a daily basis) is that they are all bad; otherwise, Barbara Eder's *Inside America* works as an analysis of juxtapositions.

The film starts as a group of poor teenagers steal beer from a neighborhood convenience store, then we cut to an ROTC drill squad raising the U.S. flag in front of the high school. Later the ROTC drill squad's maneuvers are juxtaposed with cheerleader practice and the loud arguing between the poor teens is juxtaposed with the barking orders of the ROTC drill squad. Poor students in ESL classes are juxtaposed with rich students in modeling class. Broken homes — kids living with foster parents, grandparents or drugged-out parents — are juxtaposed with the over-bearing parents of the rich kids. The poor kids get bad grades and have bad attendance records while the rich kids appear to be passing their classes just fine. Most importantly, the rich kids are U.S. citizens and the poor kids are illegal immigrants or at least do not have a social security number.

As we learn during one of the classes, the students are taught that even the poor and underprivileged can realize the American dream (you know, the old Victorian house with a white picket fence); they can be a part of it, work their way up from the bottom to the top. Who knows how they will be able to do that without social security numbers, especially if the political right enacts more state laws similar to the Arizona immigration law (SB1070). One of the more humorous (albeit it tinged with bitterness) moments is when one of the ROTC students is asked to describe the American way of life, he responds: "Following orders."

Eder focuses primarily on six high schoolers: Patty (Patty Barrera) lives with her two grandmothers (Cary Gonzalez and Jovita Gonzalez). She is turning 18 soon and her family is trying to set her up with a good (religious and wealthy) boy (Eduardo Aramburo) from church; Patty is dating Manni (Raul Juarez), a tortilla factory worker who lives with his mother (Criselda Argullin), a drug addict; Zuly (Zuleyma Jaime) is trying to figure out where she is going to live once she turns 18, because that is when she will have to leave her foster home; Aimee (Aimeé Lizette Saldivar) is the head cheerleader, front runner in the "most beautiful" contest at Hanna High, and heavy cocaine user; Aimee's boyfriend, Carlos (Carlos Benavides), is an anti-immigrant ROTC student who enjoys shooting his paint gun at freaked-out bystanders while speeding around town in his big ass truck; Ricky (Luis De Los Santos) is a shy and naive nerdy kid who gets picked on in school, and hopelessly tries to sell cookies so that he can travel with the rest of the school choir to Disney World.

Eder's feature film debut is a raw, brutal and jaded perspective of Brownsville; but from what I have heard about Brownsville, it is pretty damn near spot on. *Inside America* is based on Eder's — a native Austrian — experiences as an exchange student in Brownsville in 1994. Eder dedicates herself to discovering the truth in this story by utilizing non-actors like: real gang members, beauty contestants and illegal immigrants. ***Inside America* is very clearly a critique of an outsider looking in** (she seems intent on revealing herself as an outsider by way of the film's soundtrack), **but sometimes it does take someone as far removed as Eder to show the people living inside America the truth.**

Rating: 7/10

<http://smellslikescreenspirit.com/2011/03/inside-america-review/>



Inside America



INSIDE
AMERICA

Score: 90

Director: Barbara Eder

**Cast: Raul Juarez, Aimeé Lizette Saldivar,
Zuleyma Jaime, Luis De Los Santos**

Running Time: 107

Rated: NR

Author(s): Katie Scott

Inside America tells a documentary story through the lens of a narrative feature. The stories are all too real, but that's what makes for a great feature film.

There are six teenagers all attending the same high school. Some of them are friends, but mostly they don't know each other except for chance encounters. The stress of being a teenager confronts all of them while they live their lives in Brownsville, Texas.

Watching *Inside America* was like reliving high school. We all have known these six kids for whatever reason whether we liked them or not. The amount of accuracy this film had was what made it almost like a documentary. The dialogue, the acting, the settings, all helped build that realistic feeling. It was appreciated that they could capture certain aspect of teenagers without suffering from over-the-top stereotypes.

Living in Brownsville puts residents on the border with Mexico, so naturally there are more Hispanic kids attending the high school. When they spoke Spanish, there were English subtitles that cleared up any dialogue we might have missed. Unfortunately as the movie progressed, the subtitles weren't timed exactly with the conversation, which caused me to fall a little behind. It often overlapped with English dialogue, so you sometimes couldn't tell where you were in the conversation. There's no excuse for this poor timing.

***Inside America* told a story about living as a teenage through hardships. Struggling every day, these kids are trying the best they can. The film may have messed up here and there on the subtitles, but overall the story commanded your attention. And while the ending is left mostly up to the audience, *Inside America* still gives you a clear message about life.**