



65th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Panorama

PETTING ZOO

A FILM BY MICAH MAGEE

A story of love, sex and teen pregnancy in San Antonio, Texas. PETTING ZOO is the portrait of a young woman coming into her own, in an environment that does not always present ideal circumstances.



SYNOPSIS

San Antonio, Texas.

Seventeen-year-old Layla's prayers are answered when she wins a college scholarship. From a low-income family, she has been working full time at a local telemarketing company and it hasn't stopped her from being at the top of her high school class. Hanging out with her slacker boyfriend Danny and partying with her best friend Melanie round out Layla's routine. But an unplanned pregnancy changes everything. Giving into family pressure, Layla decides against an abortion, drops her college dreams and moves into her loving Grandma's trailer on the edge of town.

Layla moves forward confidently with her new daily life as a pregnant teenager, but she's still anxious about the future. She ends up meeting a new boy – Aaron – different from everyone else, and starts a new job in a diner. Just as things seem to be falling into place again, fate throws another turn. As her social fabric unravels around her, Layla begins to see her environment differently, the first step toward finding herself.





COMMENTS FROM WRITER/DIRECTOR MICAH MAGEE

SAN ANTONIO

PETTING ZOO was shot in San Antonio, Texas. It was filmed in the places of my childhood, where my teenage cousins live now: high schools built by prison architects, trailers, rock bars, abandoned half-built subdivisions, the corporate parks between the fields. I wanted to highlight the kinds of people in the film, and San Antonio itself. I think if you can be super specific about a community and a place, other local communities identify with that too - somehow from being really specific and local you can reach universal.

PETTING ZOO

When I was a kid in San Antonio, I'd walk to work along the highway. Being a pedestrian in a place like S.A. is its own experience. There was a little petting zoo on the side of the farm road between our property and I-10 highway where a slightly lame llama, a donkey, a fancy chicken and some half-sized horses shared a pen. The llama and the donkey were constantly attempting copulation, for lack of anything better to do I guess. One day, when I was passing by, this red open-topped sports car stopped and a beautiful blond woman

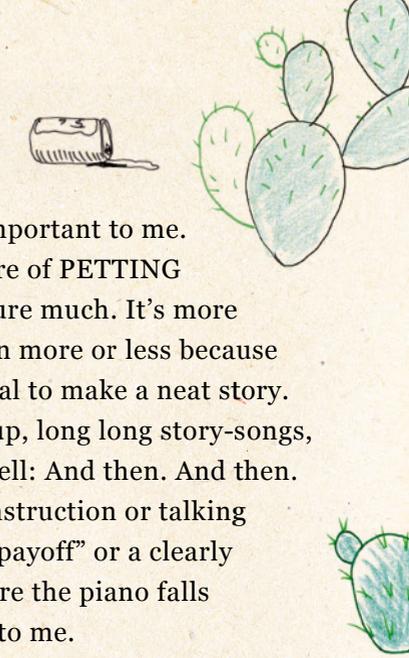
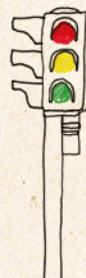
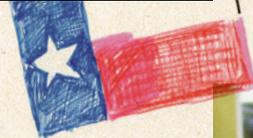
stepped out with her beautiful sunglasses boyfriend. She wanted to pet the llama, who was still being mounted by the donkey. She and her boyfriend stood awhile cooing. At that point I just passed on but the general screwed-upness of that picture stayed with me. For me, PETTING ZOO references sex and being stuck somewhere, but still has something playful about it.

THAT BOTHERSOME FEELING

I wanted to weave through PETTING ZOO an element which is very important to me: this feeling when you wake up that you are not sure if you are forgetting who you really are. Maybe you are more real someplace else and you are forgetting the most important thing. What is that most important thing? Something is slipping away from you. It is a bothersome feeling. Especially combined with the feeling that life is hurtling you through time and space in a direction you aren't sure you want to be going. The difference from feeling like you have ambition in life and suddenly feeling like it doesn't matter; you're stuck where you are. Giving in to the surroundings.

BALLAD STRUCTURE

Film language, and language in general, are important to me. I don't care much about drama, so the structure of PETTING ZOO does not try to follow a strict time structure much. It's more like an ballad structure in which things happen more or less because they do but not because they are really essential to make a neat story. My mom and dad sang a lot as I was growing up, long long story-songs, and I think that structure reflects life pretty well: And then. And then. And then. Very rarely, except in a fictional construction or talking to a shrink, will you find this "if-then" "setup-payoff" or a clearly understandable "because". I like cartoons where the piano falls on people's heads. That seems pretty realistic to me.





UNGUIDED EXPLORATIONS

I really don't want to tell anyone what to think about girls' rights, teen pregnancy or abortion – but I hope the film will generate some positive, mutually respectful discussion on these topics.

As a teenage girl sometimes you have sex before it means anything to you. Your body is just beginning to be yours. As a teenager you're totally obsessed with sex. It's new, it's all around you.

Too often, kids are told that there is something inherently wrong about being sexual, that sex it is something to be afraid of – to the point of them being institutionally uneducated and left alone with the consequences of their unguided explorations.

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

Although I have been mostly living in Europe these past years, I love Texas – I am a total Texas nationalist! Because I love it, I would like to see some things there change. For many years now, Texas has been at a crossroads with such issues as sexual choice, women's health, equal pay, and early education. When I was working on my screenplay, I discovered some startling documentation. In 2011, San Antonio had the second highest teen pregnancy rate of any city in America – more than 50% higher than the national average. A Texas teen will statistically have more sex, earlier, and with more people than the rest of the United States – but is much less likely to use a condom. Four thousand new teens are pregnant in San Antonio every year. According to a 2011 report, 94% of Texas public schools still teach Abstinence Only as birth control in sex education.

A PREGNANT TEENAGER

Having been a pregnant teen myself, I wanted to tell this story from a place of empathy and experience instead of a political angle. Regardless of a young woman's decision, I wanted the focus to be on her potential - as a mother or whatever else she chooses - not on the shame of some "mistake" she made or the burden she is going to place on society. It's awkward enough to be a teenage girl. As a pregnant teenager your body changes all over again.

We were specific about where to place the camera and giving time with Layla's body in each scene, to hopefully create a physical identification in the audience, so they could let go of their own body and become part of hers. I didn't want to rely on individual moments or steps in my own pregnancies to tell the story. The focus was rather on a sense of heightened awareness in environment where one is not allowed to appear vulnerable. Needing to put up a strong front to keep herself safe was something my lead actress understood very well.





DEVON KELLER AS LAYLA

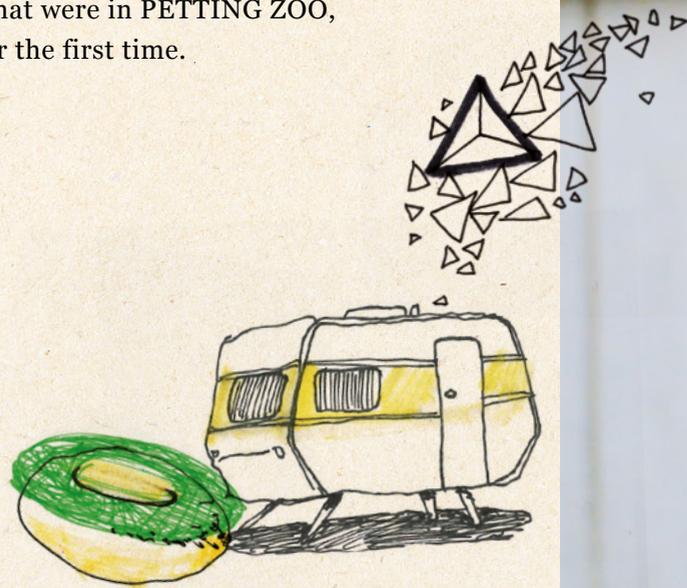
To find the right Layla, we did a huge casting call – lots of street casting in addition to big castings in LA and NY with friends. Vicky Boone was our casting director and because she does much bigger projects than ours, we got a lot of response – around 1000 girls. I saw Devon Keller the first time when she won a buritto from Taco Bell at a fashion show at my old high school, Clark, where I was scouting. She was in the audience and just ambled up to get her coupon and it was really obvious that she was it. But it took about two

months to convince her and her mom to come in for a casting and a long time to convince other people that she was going to be able to hold the role, because she'd never acted before. She was just 16 and a junior in high school. She has graduated since the shoot and is now going to community college in San Antonio, waiting tables at Outback Steakhouse and living with her mom. She would love to pursue acting full-time and eventually teach theater, but right now I think it's more about making ends meet.

NON-ACTORS ARE ACTORS

The young cast in PETTING ZOO shares the socio-economic background of the characters they play and were found in my extended family, student castings at my former high school, and open call castings in San Antonio and Houston.

I like working with these cast members we refer to as non-actors. My non-actors are all incredible actors and they can all really act. Just because someone is a non-actor doesn't mean they are not putting in a massive amount of work to find the story and the place their character is coming from. Devon Keller is an amazing actress, an incredibly hard worker and smart as hell. I would love to see her work in all kinds of other roles because she would absolutely kill it. The same goes for the three other kids that were in PETTING ZOO, all acting for the first time.





A BERLIN FILM

I am absolutely thrilled and excited that PETTING ZOO will have its world premiere at the Berlin Film Festival. As a Panorama Special, the screening is at the Zoo Palast, which (in addition to the lovely name) is one of the most beautiful cinemas in the whole world. I'm particularly happy to premiere in Berlin because I went to grad school there at the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB). This is in fact a Berlin film, even if it wasn't shot there - about half of my tried and true film crew were Berliners who braved a Texas summer.

THE SHOOT

During the shoot, we were a crew of ten most of the time (art director, costume, producer, line producer, camera, light, one sound lady who did everything, camera assistance, Devon and me), and we all lived in Utah's house (the art director) for three months except Devon, who lived with her mom. My kids are in the film too - mostly because we didn't have any babysitter. And the FBI stopped by because we'd accidentally been filming their secret headquarters when we were trying to film deer for animal scenes that never made it into the film. The biggest challenge (rattlesnakes, fire ants and sun stroke aside!) on the shoot was communication. Your film is the sum of everything you put into it - so if you want your film to be honest, you have to fight for the construction of the film to be honest and straightforward too.



SHORTS ARE FILMS TOO

My first real cinema education was as programming and managing director of Cinematexas International Short Film Festival in Austin, Texas, when it was helmed by Athina Rachel Tsangari (one of the producers on PETTING ZOO). Having watched thousands of mind-bending short films for that festival, I have to say that the short format is really its own distinct form and an end in itself. You would not confuse short prose or poetry with long fiction – or belittle the work of a poet as a sketch for a possible novel. So I wouldn't like to write off shorts as "practice" for feature films, and I hope to have the opportunity to keep making shorts in the future.

REAL PEOPLE

My husband (Danish director Johan Carlsen) and I have a small production company, Makrorama. We tag-team to coproduce our own films (in addition to looking after the three kids and the dog). Our next project - tentatively titled DISASTER DOESN'T MATTER - is a feature length road movie about male pride and the concept of freedom that starts in a small town in the Great Plains and ends on the boardwalks of Atlantic City, NJ. The shooting concept for DISASTER DOESN'T MATTER is similar to PETTING ZOO – a small crew working with real people in their own locations.



MICAH MAGEE

(WRITER/DIRECTOR)

PETTING ZOO is Micah Magee's first feature. Micah has directed a number of award-winning short films. In 2012, Micah was awarded the German Short Film Lola in Gold (German Academy Award) for HEIMKOMMEN (COMING HOME.) She has received awards from the Oberhausen Film Festival (Germany) and Premieres Plans d'Angers (France). Micah grew up in San Antonio, Texas. She graduated from the University of Texas in Austin with a dual degree in Plan II Honors and Radio-Television-Film. Also active in pirate radio and print journalism, Micah took a Fulbright journalism fellowship from Texas to Berlin, where she studied film directing at the German Film and Television Academy (DFFB). Micah lives with her three children and husband, Danish filmmaker Johan Carlsen, with whom she founded directors' co-op and production company Makrorama.



PETTING ZOO

a film by Micah Magee

Germany/USA/Greece, 2015, 92 minutes, color, english



"It means a lot if someone touches your face."

MAIN CAST

LAYLA _____ Devon Keller
 AARON _____ Austin Reed
 MELANIE _____ Deztany Gonzales
 DANNY _____ Kiowa Tucker
 GRANDMA _____ Adrienne Harrell
 LAYLA'S FATHER _____ Chris Olson
 SCHOOL COUNSELOR _____ Jocko Sims
 AUNT JEANIE _____ Emily Lape
 UNCLE DOUG _____ Cory Criswell

MAIN CREW

Written and Directed by _____ Micah Magee
 Director of Photography _____ Armin Dierolf
 Editor _____ Chris Wright
 Production Designer _____ Utah Snyder
 Costume Design _____ Joshua Hurt
 Casting Director _____ Vicky Boone
 Supervising Sound Mixer _____ Alexandre Leser
 Sound Recordist _____ Manja Ebert

Producers _____ Michael Weber
 Viola Fügen
 Johan Carlsen
 Friederike Sophie Steinbeck
 Athina Rachel Tsangari

Associate Producers _____ John Mata
 Katherine Fitzgerald



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