Try the NEW Ad-Free Salon! TURN ADS OFF

A still from "America to Me" (Starz)

Up Next

GREG PALAST: DEMS MAY HAVE LOST ALREADY
MATTHEW ROZSA

CAN I SPEND MY WAY OUT OF MY ANXIETY?
MARY ELIZABETH WILLIAMS

"SALT FAT ACID HEAT" IS A FOOD ADVENTURE
MANNY HOWARD

SMART WATCH: "HOUSE OF CARDS" MOVES ON
ERIN KEANE

White adults need to watch "America to Me," the most important show about teens on TV now

Salon talks to veteran director Steve James about the mixed realities in which his series' subjects are living

192

MELANIE MCFARLAND

SEPTEMBER 23, 2018 8:30PM (UTC)

A"merica to Me" is one of many current television series and films set in a high school, placing it among the pop culture in-crowd, particularly in this season of television. Writers love spinning drama out of the high school experience because that time of life provides so much to draw from, and so many ways to present it.

Even so, much of what we see about high school life via TV and film right now is not only fictionalized but greatly fantasized and heightened, not to mention specific. Many of the main characters, even diversely cast ones, are economically comfortable. Think Netflix's hit summer rom-com "To All the Boys I've Loved Before" or the mockumentary series "American Vandal," which recently released its second season on Netflix.

When series do depict teens living in economically precarious situations, they are extreme enough for many Americans to feel removed from the weight of such lives. An upcoming drama on The CW, "All American," follows a star football player living in Compton who is recruited to play for the team at a high school in Beverly Hills. Such circumstances plant the seeds for a potentially riveting story (and a familiar one, as anybody who has seen "The Blind Side" or "The O.C." might point out) but it may not feel relatable to the average viewer's life.

That is why "America to Me," a documentary series airing Sundays at 10 p.m. on Starz, is the most important chronicle of teen life airing on television right now as well as one the year's most important series, period.

Steve James, best known for directing the multiple award-winning 1994 documentary “Hoop Dreams,” recruited a team of four segment producers to spend an academic year at Oak Park and River Forest High School, one of the finest public schools in the area, located in a community adjacent to Chicago’s West Side.

Through the eyes of 12 students James and his producers follow, the audience glimpses a taste of teenage life as it is lived by young people who don’t live in a wealthy coastal neighborhood or, conversely, in a crumbling, crime-ridden area of a major metropolis.

These are kids who hail from a range of racial, social and economic backgrounds walking the same halls and placed in the same classrooms, presented with the same lesson plans but, as we see, receiving very different educations.

James’ own children attended Oak Park and River Forest High School, a main reason he chose to profile it. But that’s merely served as an inspiration starting point. “The heart of the series is also just the stories of these kids and their lives which I do think, just speaking for white Americans, I think white Americans need to see lives of kids like this. They need to have different ideas of who black kids are in America.”

Among the impressive subjects who form the series backbone are Charles Donalson, a gifted poet often inflamed by the inequity he witnesses around him, and Jada Buford, a burgeoning filmmaker introduced several episodes into the series.

In the fifth episode, Buford created an honest film project on race that is met with an unease by her peers. But even more poignantly, Jada forges a friendship with a white classmate, a turn she says she never would have predicted.

In that same episode we're treated to several scenes of kids and their families preparing for Christmas. But one of them, Ke'Shawn Kumsa, stares down the real possibility that his family may lose their home. Starkly divergent circumstances jostle shoulders in the hallways of Oak Park and River Forest High School that may have never been revealed on a large scale if not for this project.

READ MORE: *Tom Arnold is on “The Hunt for the Trump Tapes”*

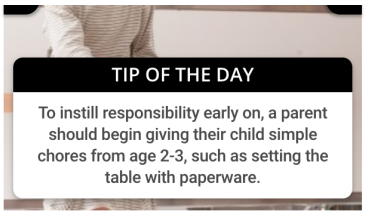
Salon spoke with James at a press event held in late July, prior to the series’ debut, about the ways that “America to Me,” airing its sixth episode out of a 10-episode season, illuminates a side of the educational gap, as well as turning an unflinching lens on the seeds of America’s racial divide. Please note that this interview has been edited for length and clarity.

There are so many stories about the educational system just in terms of terrible schools in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, a lot of stories about the school-to-prison pipeline. What I think is valuable about what you’ve done is to show the situations where there are so many financial and social inequities within one area, within the same school.

I've done films that look at impoverished and more desperate situations. “Hoop Dreams” was that kind of film. “The Interrupters,” if you've seen that, was that kind of film. I felt like for me as a filmmaker who has a career-long interest in how race plays out in this country, that it was time to look in my own backyard.

I live in Oak Park. And my kids went to that high school. To look in my own backyard is to look at a community that takes enormous pride in its inclusiveness and its diversity and is very progressive, where the schools are extremely well funded and diverse. I wanted to try to figure out what's going on in schools like Oak Park & River Forest High School, where you would think we would have had the best chance to achieve true equity in education, and yet we haven't.

Our kids are in very different circumstances than the kids who I followed in “Hoop Dreams” or the communities I was in in “The Interrupters.” Families who are still dealing with economic issues and have had to kind of figure out a way to get into Oak Park, so that they can send their kids to a school like that. So it's not like they're on easy street by any means.



These are stories of kids who too many of us think, "Well, they're fine. They don't have any issues. They're living in Oak Park and going to Oak Park & River Forest High School. Everything's gotta be great for them. Right?" And it's not.

Let's back up a little bit. You said your kids went to Oak Park?

Yeah.

And you live there. So what was the inciting incident, shall we say, that made you want to create a documentary about it?

I think it was a couple things. One is, having lived there for quite a while, it almost felt like every year the community, in various ways, and the local paper, in other ways, were sort of wringing their hands over, “Why are black students underperforming on state tests, on GPA, on ACT scores compared to white students here? Why is that happening? And why haven't we over a period of literally decades not seemingly made significant gains? What’s going on?”

So that stood out to me. And then when my kids came into the high school — I have three kids — They each had very different educational experiences.

One of my kids, because of ADD, struggled mightily in school. And I saw the ways in which that school was a very different experience even with my own kids, based on where they found themselves on the academic pecking order within that school. I couldn't help but think what it must be like for black kids in that environment. When you add not just that but you add a layer of race in a community that's struggling on these issues.

And then the other thing was, it has struck me over the years living in Oak Park is that for all our liberal goodwill and intentions, it seems very hard for liberals to have truly candid conversations about race. Because, at least speaking for white people, there's enough awareness to make many white people extremely cautious about what they say. They worry that if they say something that might offend a black person in any way, they'll be perceived as racist. So there's a kind of cautiousness, unfortunately, that happens in liberal America that also makes change hard.

What a lot of people also don't understand, or maybe it's underplayed, is what role even the geographical location of Oak Park plays in this problem. For people who have some understanding of the lines of segregation in Chicago they believe that white people live on the north side, and they're all rich. And black people live on the south side, and they're poor. And that's not the case. Oak Park, as you explain, is a prime example of that. The entire community, in terms of the economic and racial divide, changes almost block by block.

Yeah. I live four blocks from the city line. And in the year we filmed Austin had something like 70 murders. Just the community of Austin. And Oak Park had one. And it’s just, there's a dividing line, Austin Blvd, that separates one world from a very different world.

And so many of the black students — not all by any stretch — but a substantial number of black students in Oak Park families have kind of found a way to claw their way into Oak Park to escape Chicago public schools, whether it be Austin, or North Lawndale, wherever in Chicago, because they see if they can just live in Oak Park and send their kids to the schools, everything's gonna be fine. Things are better without question, but they aren't necessarily all fine, and that becomes a discovery.

There's a group of parents called Citizen's Council, they have a meeting with the administration. . . The administration explains that they're doing all this racial equity work, where they're discussing race and thinking about race. And the parents are frustrated and they're like, "That discussion is great but we need action." Their level of frustration is palpable because of a feeling that the school is doing a lot of talking but not a lot of acting.

So what do you think that this series might reveal about our general perception about the educational system in terms of the way that it is filtering students, not just by the aptitude on tests but in terms of socioeconomically, in terms of race? What do you hope it will reveal to viewers?

Well, there's lots of things. I mean it's ten hours long so there's lots in it. We get into issues like, how do we define what being intelligent and a good student is? Jada is a great example of that because at a certain point, after you've gotten to know her for a while, you start to appreciate how brilliant she is and how passionate she is.

You find out that she doesn't have a great GPA, she's not a great test taker, she struggled with her ACTs, and she's essentially a kind of . . . She is that kid that would be considered part of the achievement gap. And it just doesn't square with what you know of her in this film. And that leads to a great insight from one of the black teachers in the school, who talks about the limitations in which we define how our kids are smart.

We do a whole section on the lack of black teachers, which applies everywhere but is especially true in Oak Park. And the feeling is that the black teachers that we are featuring in the program and in the school don't feel accepted and welcomed and empowered. There are moments in the series where the series turns very analytical and looks at some of the failures and the bureaucracy and the lack of will.

But the heart of the series is also just the stories of these kids and their lives which I do think, just speaking for white Americans, I think white Americans need to see lives of kids like this. They need to have different ideas of who black kids are in America.

I've always thought of documentaries as being much more on the cutting edge, in terms of socially relevant content, than scripted in general. But I actually think documentary had been trailing scripted in this, because I do think that there are more examples in the scripted world of shows that are grappling with a fuller experience of what it means to be black or biracial in America than what has been going on in the world of documentary, which is intended to focus on the most desperate, the most dramatic stories.

Yes, and I also think they're popularized in a way that people view them as part of the reality genre. And there's a plus and minus to that, as you know, the plug being there are more people watching them. The minus is that there's a tendency for people look at these stories almost as if they're not really happening, to view real people as characters.

Right. I ran into this on when I made “Hoop Dreams.” I had an uncle who lived in California, you know, who lives in a very prosperous neighborhood. After he saw the film, in all seriousness, he said to me — and he meant this — he goes, "I had no idea that black parents wanted the same things for their children as white parents do."

Well, that was great that he got that from the film. It's a profoundly sad commentary that he needed a film to communicate that to him. But I do think that a lot of that persists to this day. In this series, you see single-parent households where they're making it work. It's not to say they're not struggling. You will see intact families. You will see loving parents. Nobody dies in this series, I'm so happy to say. No one got shot. This is not what this is about.

Yet at the same time it does not mean that they have it on Easy Street when it comes to education or living in America. That there are still hurdles and I was just really inspired by the kids we followed because so many of them have a level of awareness that I feel earlier generations around this do not have. They are so plugged in in terms of what is going on in this world in terms of race and class.

Do you feel like there was any kind of awareness of the cameras that shifted behavior while you were there?

Well that's always the $64,000 documentary question. On some level it always has some impact. But when you spend enough time with subjects, you get less of that and it gets more real. I think the portraits that we were able to draw are authentic.

We had this really diverse team of filmmakers, and I think that really helped in terms of relatability with the students we followed.

But the other thing about this generation is that with social media, there’s this awareness that whatever you put out there could be out there forever. They're much more savvy about what they will

choose to share about their lives. And this is not a series where I felt like we had to see them partying down and drunk. That's not what it's about, but we weren't going to get that anyway.

There is a level of sophistication now about media that causes kids to make certain choices about what they're willing to let you in to share. And I support that, actually.

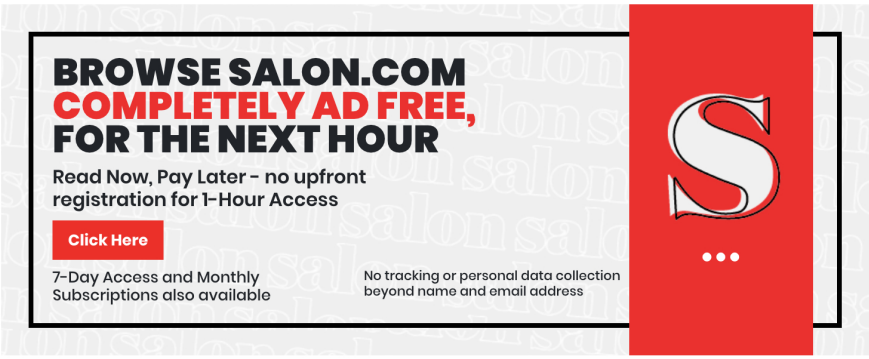
WHAT LIBERALS GET WRONG ABOUT DIVERSITY

Activist Soraya Chemaly rethinks how schools can create equitable communities for kids

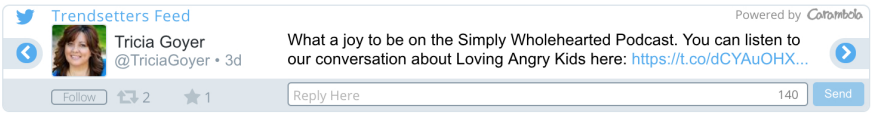
MELANIE MCFARLAND

Melanie McFarland is Salon's TV critic. Follow her on Twitter: @McTelevision

MORE FROM MELANIE MCFARLAND • FOLLOW MCTELEVISION



THIS WEEK ON salonTV



Conversation

Be the first to comment...

Terms · Privacy

Add Spot.IM to your site

Popular In the Community

Danchi
2d

She didn't walk back the comment she made about the explosive...

maisiecat54
9h

No, it's nothing like that. Have your mother, or someone who is a...

David Wallace
2d

Yes, whatever you do don't hear or read thoughtful opinions in...

We bra

stsword1
16h

Yes, let's ignore the 26,000 people of pennsylvania voters whose...

MichelleZhivago
1d

The rise of the willfully ignorant. People who are proud of their...

Robweeve
2d

he probably thought of it as a gift...a loan, what are you talking...

KE "SH

Yo Ne

FEARLESS JOURNALISM IN YOUR INBOX EVERY DAY

SIGN UP FOR OUR FREE NEWSLETTER

ENTER YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS

SUBMIT

By signing up you agree to receive email newsletters or