



Boys State

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Synopsis

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The sensational winner of the Grand Jury Prize for documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival is a wildly entertaining and continually revealing immersion into a week-long annual program in which a thousand Texas high school seniors gather for an elaborate mock exercise: building their own state government.

109 minutes

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English

Color

Filmmakers Jesse Moss and Amanda McBaine closely track the escalating tensions that arise within a particularly riveting gubernatorial race, training their cameras on unforgettable teenagers like Ben, a Reagan-loving arch-conservative who brims with confidence despite personal setbacks, and Steven, a progressive-minded child of Mexican immigrants who stands by his convictions amidst the sea of red. In the process, they have created a complex portrait of contemporary American masculinity, as well as a microcosm of our often dispiriting national political divisions that nevertheless manages to plant seeds of hope.

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"[Political parties] are likely to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government."

- George Washington, Farewell Address

The sensational winner of the Grand Jury Prize for documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival, *Boys State* is a wildly entertaining and continually revealing immersion into a week-long annual program in which a thousand Texas high school seniors gather for an elaborate mock exercise: building their own state government. Filmmakers Jesse Moss and Amanda McBaine closely track the escalating tensions that arise within a particularly riveting gubernatorial race, training their cameras on unforgettable teenagers like Ben, a Reagan-loving arch-conservative who brims with confidence despite personal setbacks, and Steven, a progressive-minded child of Mexican immigrants who stands by his convictions amidst the sea of red. In the process, they have created a complex portrait of contemporary American masculinity, as well as a microcosm of our often dispiriting national political divisions that nevertheless manages to plant seeds of hope.

Apple Original Films and A24 present *Boys State*, a Concordia Studio production. The film is directed and produced by Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss through their Mile End Films. The film's executive producers are Laurene Powell Jobs, Davis Guggenheim, Jonathan Silberberg and Nicole Stott. Shannon Dill serves as co-executive producer. The filmmaking team includes editor Jeff Gilbert, director of photography Thorsten Thielow and composer T. Griffin.

With all the rousing emotions of an underdog sports drama,

at first glance, *Boys State* is the story of a no-holds-barred, mock teen election. But it is also a rare crowd-pleasing tale that holds a revelatory mirror up to a moment we're so wrapped up in right now it's hard to see it clearly—one of the most politically divided and disillusioned, yet fired-up, moments since America's founding.

The film, which took the Grand Jury Prize at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, is rife with election fever; but there isn't a seasoned politician in it. Instead, it embeds itself into the vibrant and volatile relationships between a group of alternately knowing and naïve, testosterone-fueled and still-maturing Texas teenagers embroiled in a venerable, summertime political competition known as Boys State.

Sponsored by The American Legion since 1935, Boys State (and the gender-separated Girls State) is a national civics education program designed to immerse high school juniors into the nuts and bolts of public governance. It is also a take-no-prisoners battle for victory. At the core of the week-long event is the pitting of two fictional parties—Federalists and Nationalists—against one another in a contentious campaign for Governor and other key positions for which there can only be one victor.

From within this electric atmosphere—packed with equal parts teen spirit, adolescent angst and the hilariously, maddeningly hyper-opinionated manners of our times—filmmakers Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss focus in on the stirring journeys of four talented boys destined to clash.

In the running for the coveted Governor position are Steven, the quiet son of Mexican immigrants who blossoms into a soaring orator on stage; and Robert, an easy-going yet complex and layered jokester who seems to instinctively play

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to the crowd.

There's also savvy Ben, a double amputee who shines at war-room strategy, and boldly defiant René, one of very few African Americans at Boys State. Both are vying for the powerful party chairs.

As the competition heats up, what ensues is an uncanny microcosm of the best and worst of social life in America now. There is high-minded idealism and reckless demagoguery, authentic passion and absurd promises, ugly smears and fiery persuasion. There is the cynicism that has soaked deep into the bedrock of our democracy, yet also the pure buzz of heartfelt flashes of unity.

Mesmerizing yet sobering, it is the distinctly humane vision of McBaine and Moss that gives *Boys State* a power beyond its dramatic suspense. As an of-this-minute take on coming-of-age, the film invites us to watch Steven, Robert, Ben, and René wrestle with all the potential and pitfalls that lie ahead for their adult selves beyond this playful game. The paradox is that even as they're having so much fun imitating the cocksure leaders around them, they are also navigating their own tricky paths through race, class, and differences; wrestling with doubts and internal red lines; and wondering what it takes to matter, not just in this all-out election, but to one another.

For McBaine and Moss, *Boys State* turned into an odyssey they couldn't have predicted upon their arrival in Austin in June of 2018. Shot in a single week with six roving camera teams chasing moments of fun and mischief, conflict and connection, anguish and humor and high-stakes decision-making on the fly, they found a story evolving in directions that defied anticipation.

The only thing that was crystal clear is that they were capturing

lightning in a bottle. They could see that what they most hoped for was happening: the boys' heightened emotions seemed to mix with the nation's anxious mood, painting a vivid portrait of how our current world of fury-driven, uncompromising politics is being soaked up, shouldered by and sometimes rebelled against by the generation to whom the future belongs. Having taken the last decade into their very personas, they were churning back out what they had absorbed in their own illuminating ways.

What McBaine and Moss captured was at times unsettling, at others intoxicating, much like politics in America right now. Similarly, they came out of it all at once alarmed and full of hope.

"This is such a different era to grow up in," observes McBaine. "Even for 17-year-olds, the way everyone talks now is so polarized. But what we also saw is that the search for common ground that seems less and less possible in Congress and in Washington D.C. was starting to happen at Boys State. The chemistry between the boys we followed was intense, raw, funny, and authentic. It was contentious a lot of the time, but we saw so many different ways they were attempting to connect."

Adds Moss: "The biggest question we had going into this film was how much will we see the corrosive effect of the political atmosphere on the way these teen boys conduct themselves? We did indeed see it come out in ways that were genuinely scary. We saw racism, dirty tricks and the desire to win at the cost of your values. The film is honest and real about all of that. But we also came away with a legitimate sense of promise. When you see Steven Garza successfully rallying the boys to summon their better angels, and when you see them trying harder and harder to engage one another as the week goes on,

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you see a path forward. This was a transformative week in the lives of our characters on multiple levels. We felt so blessed to have this chance to capture it.”

The questions

A day into the 2018 Texas Boys State, there came a moment when married filmmaking partners Amanda McBaine and Jesse Moss, parents themselves, were struck dizzy by the degree to which 17-and-18-year-olds were pitch-perfectly aping the most ritualized behaviors of our political culture. It was all there, writ perhaps even larger by the frenzied, transparent energy of their youth: the jingoism, the folksiness, the outrage, the sanctimony, and, on occasion, the authentic ring of honesty and a palpable yearning to make a difference. Maybe watching teens mimicking the world we’re living in was a way to understand exactly what adults are handing off to them.

“We felt we’d come upon a prism through which we could peer pretty deep into this divisive moment in politics and American democracy,” says Moss.

It had all started a year before, with a shocking secession. In 2017, Texas Boys State suddenly burst into the national headlines when the event’s Legislature overwhelmingly voted for Texas to leave the Republic, abruptly rejecting wholesale the American ideal of working towards a stronger union. Seeing the coverage, McBaine and Moss couldn’t resist wanting to know more. Why had these boys who were supposed to be exploring the pleasures of civic discourse instead careened into the most extreme political move? Was it just a cheeky lark or had today’s kids been entirely subsumed into the unruly gladiatorial spectacle politics had become? And what did such brewing disunity bode for what is still a young, evolving, and breakable American democracy?

All they knew at the time was that Boys State had been a formative part of plenty of center-stage careers—from Bill Clinton and Dick Cheney to Rush Limbaugh and Mark Wahlberg. But those men had gone to Boys State in different times.

The questions came fast and furious about what the experience of Boys State was like now in the eye of this raging storm of partisan combat, populist rage, conspiracy theorizing and the constant call to carefully curate one’s social image. Who was even drawn to Boys State in the early 21st Century? Given the noxious miasma of angry chatter across the USA, would they echo the echo chamber around them or find ways to transcend it? Would their instincts be compassionate or cut-throat? And could teens still change and grow just from encountering new people and ideas?

The possibilities were irresistible even if the risks were high. McBaine and Moss were certainly well-positioned to go in search of answers, known for making non-fiction films as adventurous and multi-faceted as fiction. Most recently, they collaborated on *The Overnighters*, following the consequences for a North Dakota pastor who opened his church to the homeless; the film was short-listed for an Oscar. Moss is also known for co-directing (with Tony Gerber) *Full Battle Rattle*, about another revealing simulation: Iraqi villages built by the US military in California’s Mojave Desert. In addition, Moss recently directed all five episodes of Netflix’s acclaimed series “The Family,” probing the secretive organization that wields immense power in Washington.

Still, for all their experience with the unpredictability of verité cinema, McBaine and Moss suspected this project would be their biggest leap of faith yet. They’d be diving into an event more tightly compressed in its timeframe than any they’d

tackled, yet vast in thematic scope.

At first, they weren't even sure if they could gain the unfettered access that they would need from The American Legion.

"We figured the worst that could happen is that they would say no," recalls McBaine. "But the minute I got the first guy on the phone—Paul Barker, then Chairman of The American Legion Texas Boys State—I knew we were going to do this.

He was so open, far more than I expected, and we had a great conversation about all the public figures who had gone to Boys State as a kid and what it has meant as an American institution."

Access was one thing, finding characters who could drive the storytelling was another. In the spring of 2018, three months before Boys State began, McBaine and Moss started traveling across Texas, interviewing swaths of the 1,100 boys who would be heading to Austin as soon as school was out.

Naturally, they had fingers crossed that they might hit upon a few unusually charismatic kids. But it turned out better than that. Early on, they found and got to know Steven Garza, Robert MacDougall and Ben Feinstein. After they began following René Otero later, riveted by his barn-burning speech vying for Chairman of the Nationalist Party, they were drawn to this quartet not only for their enticing star power as individuals, but for what they represented in different facets of America. Two were young men of color, still a distinct minority at Texas Boys State. And, all of them had confidently chosen political sides, even if their minds were perhaps ajar just enough to be changed.

"We went into the casting open-minded, but we always had our eye on trying to find the most diverse group representing different points of view," Moss explains. "Even among the most

politically ambitious and sophisticated of the boys, Steven, Robert, Ben, and René stood apart. They were smart, funny, irreverent and talented. Most of all they had an intangible, sometimes volatile chemistry where it was compelling to watch them interact. They're each self-conscious in the way teenagers are, which is part of what creates so much drama, but they were also naturals on camera."

Adds McBaine, "We completely fell for them as people. We didn't know of course any of what would happen once things began. We could not know the ways they would go up against each other and become such fierce rivals. We only could guess they were each likely to thrive socially and were capable of surprising us. But the amount they surprised us was itself a big surprise."

The boys

The four boys at the center of *Boys State* don't necessarily look like they would hang out together or bond as brothers over a long, hot summer. They each hail from different cities and divergent backgrounds, even before you get to ideology. But what tied them together is that they seemed to totally get, and have die-hard respect for, one another's high-flying aspirations.

Moss and McBaine took great joy in watching them experiment with various ingredients that might make up their adult selves—toting with what quantity of compromise, pride, identity, and moral bearings would go into the mix. Sure, they were imitating a lot of the grandstanding constantly coming at them from the culture at large, but they were also testing out which ideas really meant something to them and what values could and could not be sacrificed.

Steven Garza was the quiet one who no one really saw coming

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as a threat for the win, until he let loose his striking gift for reaching people at a gut level. Having grown up in Houston as the son of an undocumented mother (now a legal resident), he both knew in his bones and could communicate to others what it's like to be an immigrant, an outsider, and to want for a better life. An admirer somehow of both Bernie Sanders and Napoleon, Steven brought a more liberal point of view than his peers, which could have spelled peril. But instead, with his diligence and passionately plainspoken candor, he started making unexpected in-roads. At times, he could be self-doubting and awkward. But he stirred everyone with his courage as the underdog for Governor.

"One thing we saw instantly in Steven was a level of maturity very unusual at that age. He has an old soul quality. He's a great listener and he truly cares about other people," says McBaine.

Steven drew a sharp contrast to his rival for the Nationalist Party nomination: Robert MacDougall. A tousle-haired football player from Austin with the effortless charm of a cool kid, Robert nevertheless hewed to a very conservative platform, convinced that's how the game must be played. Robert's instincts were always to keep things light, but underneath he held tight to a very serious dream of attending West Point.

"When we first saw Robert, he looked like he walked right out of Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*," muses McBaine.

Adds Moss: "Robert was in some ways everything he appeared to be on the surface—a handsome athlete with a private school background—but as we got to know him better, we discovered layers of intelligence and complexity that kept surprising us and deepening his character."

Ben Feinstein, the runaway favorite for Party Chairman of

the Federalists, was a mass of infectious high energy who had a way of letting people see into his mind. He had a mind perfectly tooled for political persuasion with a sharp wit and no-guts-no-glory approach to, well, everything. Ben seemed to have arrived at Boys State already a fully formed star. Having lost both legs to meningitis at age 3, Ben grew up in San Antonio idolizing Ronald Reagan, developing into a staunch believer in self-reliance and hard work. But nothing could fire him up like a pure political dogfight. "Some people are sports junkies, I'm a political junkie," he would proudly tell the audience.

"Ben's magnetism, intelligence and great sense of humor were immediately evident to us—at this young age, he is already an incredible force of personality," comments Moss.

The final lead character only became apparent when René Otero turned the National Party upside down with his unignorably fierce and heartfelt speech for Party Chairman. René had just moved to Texas from Chicago and arrived at Boys State unsure if or how he could fit in as a relatively progressive African American trying to hold his own in a largely white and conservative group ("I have never seen so many white people, ever," he quips at one point). Though his ride is a rollercoaster that includes an impeachment threat and racist attack ads, René came out of his week at Boys State saying that's exactly what every liberal needs to experience.

"Once we saw René's incredible talent in that first galvanizing speech we were hooked," says McBaine. "Importantly, he gave us the perspective of someone facing the larger and subtler challenges of racism and being an outsider. We couldn't have known the degree to which he'd shift from such strength and confidence to showing real vulnerability, but he had an amazing journey."

Much as *Boys State* is about the raw social reality of early 21st Century America, it also is a window into boyhood circa 2020. It examines the rhythms and contemporary pressures that play into male friendships today, and the current forces shaping boys into men. Just the fact that the week is boys-only generates a space for raucous aggression and the potential to devolve into *Lord of the Flies* anarchy. It also underlines some of the invisible effects of our politics still being largely male-dominated.

“We were faced with an immense amount of male energy,” admits McBaine. “It was challenging at times for me, but it also brought up another big question that we had a chance to explore from a first-hand point of view: how are young men doing in our society right now?”

While the gender-exclusiveness of Boys State might seem anachronistic, Moss notes: “One of the most compelling things about Boys State is that it seems to have one foot in Midcentury traditions and one in the 21st Century—and that is also kind of who we are as a country.”

Amid the redolent masculinity, another central tension that arose was how much the boys would respond to human issues with their hearts versus clamoring towards a colder, more warlike footing. “There was among the boys a real split between two core philosophies—that of empathy and that of strength—and that became one of the themes that intrigued us most,” says Moss.

The epic week of Boys State

The boys McBaine and Moss had chosen were alluring, the timing was potentially explosive, but nothing the filmmaking duo saw up until June could fully prepare them for the ambiance of Boys State. The heat, the sweat, the smells,

sounds, and manic force of 1,100 teenage boys vying for attention, validation, social success, and just a really good time was overpowering.

All the intensity of a 17-year-old summer—the last-chance silliness, the untethered emotions, the virile posturing, the private doubts, the razor-tongued friendships, the gossip, the feuds, and the pressure cooker of knowing you’re on the precipice of adulthood—was in play. Add to that the incendiary politics and it seemed like the whole shoot could easily boil over. McBaine and Moss had to find their own core of stillness within the tumult.

“I think we looked at this atmosphere and wondered whether it could really be life-changing,” says Moss. “We didn’t know just how momentous it would be for our characters until we were in it.”

Indeed, at first the chaos and giddiness seemed almost impenetrable. “On the first day all our worst fears of what it might be like seemed confirmed,” recalls Moss, able to laugh about it now, given how things turned around. “It was mayhem. And we had to trust that these complex, charismatic kids we had chosen to follow were going to take us down interesting paths going forward.”

Early days saw the passing of jokey legislation such as a state-wide ban on pineapple pizza. But it wasn’t long before the most heated schisms of the last two years began to erupt. “The school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas had just happened, and that became the most galvanizing topic, especially when Steven came out for background checks,” says McBaine. “Guns, abortion and immigration, all the issues America has been talking about, became central to the party platforms.”

As they did, fractures opened up and sometimes venom

poured out, reverberations of the holes in the American fabric. Yet just when it might seem the participants were retreating into extremist corners, that elusive center would make an appearance. “Amid all the color, laughter and playfulness, we saw the game becoming real for the boys,” observes Moss.

Another moment that took the filmmakers’ breath away came when Robert suddenly revealed he was secretly pro-choice, despite making hardline speeches to the contrary. When Robert confessed that “sometimes you can’t win with what you believe in your heart,” it changed the film, raising the very real prospect that the boys’ seemingly entrenched opinions might not always be what they seem.

“We had no idea until he told us that Robert was pretending to be anti-abortion because he just wanted to win,” Moss says. “But because Robert was able to articulate his reasoning so well, it helped us to further explore this idea of values versus winning. In contrast with Steven’s approach, it also spoke to some core questions we face as a country: What role should compromise play in our politics? And what might make finding a middle ground feel more realizable in these times?”

Robert’s revelation was only possible due to a key decision made before shooting began. In addition to following the sweeping action in Austin, McBaine and Moss also created a low-key “interview room,” where each boy could privately and comfortably discuss all the things that went down on any given day. It was in that refuge that the boys often opened up their truest selves.

“We set up the room specifically to create a space for reflection,” says McBaine, “and to let you get to know them on a whole other level. We suspected they would be different than they were with their posse and that proved true. Those scenes

bring out feelings they don’t show elsewhere.”

In fact, the film’s entire creative design and distinctive framing were geared towards highlighting the group dynamics and the conflicts between how the boys act in the crowd versus how they feel inwardly. “We wanted the action to always be in dialogue with what the boys are really thinking,” explains Moss. “We particularly wanted to use wide-screen to our advantage so that in the group scenes, you can see both who is talking and who is reacting all in one frame.”

With so much happening at once, there was a need to have multiple camera teams working at once in different places, something new to McBaine and Moss. “We’re used to doing more intimate, one-man-band shoots, so it was quite exciting to push our comfort level,” Moss says.

They recruited a renowned devotee of raw verité, director of photography Thorsten Thielow, who they worked with on *The Family*, to lead their mixed-gender corps of cinematographers. Joining Thielow were Wolfgang Held (*The 4th Estate*), Claudia Raschke (*RBG*), Martina Radwan (*The Eagle Huntress*), Patrick Bresnan (*Pahokee*), Daniel Carter (*The Case Against Adnan Syed*) and Ivy Chiu. At times Moss and McBaine picked up a camera and a boom, respectively, to serve as a 7th unit.

“What all the DPs shared in common is that they’re really good listeners,” notes McBaine. “They weren’t just following the boys physically. They were following the emotions.”

The aftermath

When the week at Boys State came to its wildly climactic and emotional finale, the challenges for McBaine and Moss were merely beginning. The boys would go on to chill out for the summer before their senior years of high school.

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But the filmmakers were headed into an intensive year-long edit, during which a painstaking process forged the organic, seamless storytelling.

The wandering camera teams had amassed a head-spinning 42 terabytes of footage, which meant the filmmakers had to shear and sculpt it all down to expose the emotional center. “Going into the edit we already knew where the heart of the story was but to get that right wasn’t easy,” sums up Moss. “Pretty quickly we had an early assemblage but honing it down took a lot of time and thought. We were really fortunate that our executive producers, Davis Guggenheim, Jonathan Silberberg and Nicole Stott, gave us all the space and time we needed to keep strengthening it.”

Adds McBaine: “The big challenge was balancing all four main characters so that you have emotional purchase with each of their stories. We wanted to show the intricacy of all that’s going on behind-the-scenes without ever losing the sheer momentum of the Governor’s race.”

The film’s dynamic pace was further amplified by the music, a blend of Todd Griffin’s (*The Overnights*) percussive score with the emblematic marching band sounds typical of Texas Boys State, and the instantly recognizable bars of diegetic classic rock pouring from speakers.

“There’s something really exciting about being in a room with a marching band—it was one of the most exhilarating musical experiences I’ve had in a long time, so that was a big inspiration for the music,” says McBaine. “There’s a bit of campiness to Boys State, too, so we liked using the old timey-ness of the marching band sound. And then we talked with Todd about using some of that same band instrumentation but with a more serious and contemporary tone for the score.”

When the film was accepted into the Sundance Film Festival, the pair was as uncertain about how things would go as they had been arriving at Boys State. They had no clue it would take on such a life of its own in the hearts of audiences, sparking dialogue and lasting affection for the characters. The array of responses was massively gratifying, given that what they had most wanted was to get people talking about democracy, to stop taking for granted that it can survive without deep care.

They were also thrilled to discover that so many people wanted to know... what will happen next in these boys’ lives?

“Unlike scripted films, the story of non-fiction lives keeps going when the film is over, so an ending never comes,” points out McBaine. “We became very bonded to Steven, Robert, Ben, and René, and have stayed in touch with them, so we’re excited to see what their next chapters bring.”

Will the kids be alright? McBaine and Moss believe they unearthed a few signs in *Boys State* that show audiences that these four boys will be fine. They might even be able see past their differences to work together in the future. But they are also realistic about the imminent dangers of further American splintering.

“We’re living in a despairing moment in some ways. But what this journey gave us is a sense that there are incredible young people who are smart, inspiring and more ready for the world to come than we might give them credit for,” concludes Moss. “I don’t know that we saw a solution to our divisions. But I do know there’s a yearning out there for having a different tone and tenor to our politics, and if this film shines a light on that, it’s a start. It’s up to Steven, Robert, Ben, René and their generation to be part of that.”

The Cast

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The Cast

Steven Garza

Steven Garza comes from Houston, Texas. He is the child of Mexican immigrants and attended a public high school. As he says in the film, his mother was undocumented for a time. She is now a legal resident of the United States. Inspired by Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016 (when he was fourteen), Steven volunteered on political campaigns in Texas, and became a leader of Texas Student Democrats. "Politics is my passion," says Steven. His leadership role model is Napoleon Bonaparte. A student of Napoleon's life and military campaigns, he invokes him frequently. An underdog challenger, whose background and political views, place him squarely outside the mainstream at Boys State, Steven rises brilliantly by calling the Boys to their highest ideals. Steven is now a student at the University of Texas at Austin.

Robert MacDougall

Robert MacDougall is from Austin, Texas. Robert served as a United States Senate Page in Washington D.C. the summer before Boys State. He graduated in 2019 from St. Andrew's Episcopal School where he served as Student Body Vice President, having been elected in 2018, a month prior to filming *Boys State*. Robert was also the co-captain of his high school football team during his senior year. Robert is currently a Cadet enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point, fulfilling a dream he has had since a young age. He is expected to graduate from West Point in 2023 as an Army Officer with the rank of Second Lieutenant. Robert is an active student and follower of U.S. politics and U.S. history. He believes that all young men and women should find a way to serve their country following graduation from high school or college, knowing the definition of service can vary from person to person. Robert also has a strong interest in the business world, having worked as an intern on the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange. At Boys State, Robert competes for the Nationalist Party nomination for Governor with the motto, "Go big or go home."

Ben Feinstein

Ben Feinstein grew up in San Antonio with his mom Karen, a doctor, and his step-dad. Ben is a double-amputee, the result of a bacterial meningitis infection contracted when he was two years old. "It's my normal," he says. A Ronald Reagan doll on his bookshelf is a testament to his political precocity and somewhat conservative views. Ben is a self-professed politics junkie and experienced in debate and model UN. Ben's disability prevents him from serving in the military, so he has set his sights on intelligence work with the CIA or the FBI. His ambition extends to Boys State, where he arrives intending to run for Governor. Circumstances force him to question himself and quickly recalibrate his ambitions. Late in our story he makes a brilliant but controversial tactical decision that influences the outcome of the election. Ben is now a student at Southern Methodist University.

The Cast

René Otero

René Otero is an outsider, to Texas and to Boys State. A recent transplant from Chicago, he finds himself one of a handful of African American statesmen among a largely White and politically conservative group. René is a captivating orator who grabs the attention of the Nationalist Party with a galvanizing speech, but he must struggle to hold onto power by uniting a politically divided party and fending off an impeachment threat. "I'm gonna keep my job if it's the last thing I do," he declares. His success and alliance with underdog Steven Garza puts him and his party on a collision course with Ben Feinstein and the Federalist party. René is currently a student at the University of Texas at Austin.

The Crew

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Amanda McBaine

Director/ Producer

Amanda McBaine is a Sundance Award-winning producer making her feature directing debut with *Boys State*. As a producer, her films include *The Overnighters*, *The Bandit*, *Speedo* and *Ghosts of Attica*. Along with her husband and creative partner Jesse Moss, she is a partner in Mile End Films, a San Francisco-based production company.

Jesse Moss

*Director/ Producer/
Cinematographer*

Jesse Moss is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker. His films include *The Overnighters* (Sundance Special Jury Prize for Intuitive Filmmaking), recognized by many critics as the top documentary of 2014; *The Bandit*; *Full Battle Rattle* (SXSW Special Jury Prize); *Speedo: A Demolition Derby Love Story*; and *Con Man*. His recent work includes, in collaboration with Alex Gibney's Jigsaw Productions, the "Payday" episode of the Netflix series "Dirty Money," and "The Family," a five-part series, also for Netflix, about an enigmatic and influential Christian organization, based on Jeff Sharlet's best-selling book. His recent short film "La Boca Del Lobo" for the New York Times Op Doc series, about the impact of immigration-related arrests on the Hispanic community in Atlanta, marked his first collaboration with Concordia Studio. As a producer, his films include *Gay Chorus Deep South* (2019 Tribeca Audience Award) and *William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe* (Sundance 2010). He frequently works with his wife and co-conspirator Amanda McBaine.

Jeff Gilbert

Editor

Jeff Gilbert is an Emmy Award-nominated film editor, known for the Academy Award-nominated documentary *Extremis*, Netflix Original documentary *The Rachel Divide*, and Sundance Jury winner *The Overnighters*. He is a NYFA Award winning writer and Sundance Institute Documentary Edit and Story Lab fellow.

T. Griffin

Composer

T. Griffin has composed scores for over 40 feature length films, and dozens of live and multimedia projects. Notable titles include the Academy-Award-nominated *Life, Animated* and multiple festival award winners *Quest*, *The Overnighters*, and *Welcome to Leith* as well as the recently Oscar Shortlisted *One Of Us* and *Charm City*. Griffin created scores for several documentary series, including Jesse Moss' "The Family" for Netflix. He has composed and performed live film/music events with filmmakers including Sam Green, Jem Cohen, Brent Green and Esther Robinson. These shows have toured internationally and been presented by The Barbican, BAM Next Wave, The Walker Art Center. He was a fellow at the Sundance Composers' Lab in 2008, and has twice been nominated for Cinema Eye Honors for Original Music Score. He is based in Brooklyn, New York.

The Crew

Thorsten Thielow

Director of Photography

Thorsten Thielow is a NYC based Cinematographer making documentary films and commercials. Thorsten is a founding member of a boutique-DP collective Kamera Kollektiv, whose members were crucial collaborators on *Boys State*. Thor's recent documentary work includes: *The Fourth Estate*, directed by Liz Garbus, (Tribeca 2018); "The Family," directed by Jesse Moss (Netflix 2019); *This Is Personal*, directed by Amy Berg (Sundance 2019); and *Robin Williams - Come Inside My Mind*, directed by Marina Zenovich (Sundance 2018).

Davis Guggenheim

Executive Producer

Davis Guggenheim is a critically acclaimed, Academy Award-winning director and producer. His work includes *Waiting for Superman*, *It Might Get Loud*, and *He Named Me Malala*. His film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, featuring former U.S. Vice President Al Gore, won the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2007. Davis directed multiple films for President Obama, including convention films in 2008, 2012 and 2016. Davis previously worked in television as a director and producer of the Emmy Award-winning HBO series "Deadwood." His television directing credits also include episodes of "The Shield," "Alias," "24," "NYPD Blue," and "ER."

In 2017, Davis founded Concordia Studio based in Venice, CA. He currently serves as Founder and Chief Creative Officer of Nonfiction.

Jonathan Silberberg

Executive Producer

Jonathan Silberberg is a creative producer, showrunner, and executive producer with over twenty years of experience producing nonfiction films and series. He has worked on feature films and series for companies including RadicalMedia, HBO, Netflix, Showtime, Imagine Entertainment, Participant Media, Sundance Channel, A&E, and Discovery. His credits include Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's Oscar and Emmy nominated feature film *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory* for HBO, National Geographic's hybrid series "Mars," in collaboration with Ron Howard and Brian Grazer's Imagine Entertainment and RadicalMedia, Nat Geo's "Breakthrough," and Sundance Channel's "Iconoclasts." He began his career at the storied documentary company Maysles Films and worked for many years with RadicalMedia.

Jonathan currently serves as President of Nonfiction at Concordia Studio.

Nicole Scott

Executive Producer

Prior to joining Concordia Studio, Nicole Stott (Executive Producer) was Head of Documentary at multiple BAFTA, Emmy and triple Academy Award winning Passion Pictures, one of the most prolific independent producers of theatrical feature documentaries in the international marketplace, with a reputation for critical and commercial success. Working alongside M.D. and veteran producer John Battsek for over thirteen years, Nicole creatively helmed the company's slate and produced some of the most acclaimed nonfiction titles of recent years. Credits include: Academy Award and BAFTA winner *Searching for Sugar Man*, Prime Time Emmy winning "Manhunt," Academy Award nominated *Restrepo*, BAFTA Outstanding Debut Winner *The Imposter*, Netflix Original three-part series "Five Came Back," HBO's critically acclaimed "The Final Year," and Peabody Award winning "Listen To Me Marlon." More recently Nicole served as Executive Producer on Netflix three-part series "Inside Bill's Brain," an anthology of five documentary films for the NY Times Op Docs, titled *From Here to Home* (including Laura Nix's 2020 Academy nominated "Walk Run Cha Cha"). Nicole also Executive Produced four new feature documentary films premiered in US Competition at Sundance 2020: *Time* (directed by Sundance 2020 US Documentary Best Director Garrett Bradley); Ramona Diaz's *A Thousand Cuts*; *Bloody Nose Empty Pockets* directed by Bill Ross & Turner Ross, and Sundance 2020 Grand Jury Prize winning *Boys State* (Amanda McBaine/Jesse Moss).

Nicole currently serves as Executive Vice President of Nonfiction at Concordia Studio.

Shannon Dill

Co-Executive Producer

Shannon Dill is an Academy-award winning producer with twenty years' experience in feature documentaries, non-fiction television and series. Before joining Concordia Studio, she produced the Oscar, BAFTA and Emmy-award winning feature film, *Free Solo*, with directors E. Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin. Over the course of her career, Shannon has produced several award winning and critically acclaimed features, working on projects from inception to delivery, including Grammy winning *Foo Fighters: Back and Forth*, Emmy-winning *Inheritance*, *Running the Sahara*, *Price for Peace*, and Academy short-listed, *He Named Me Malala*.

Shannon currently serves as EVP of Nonfiction Physical Production & Operations at Concordia Studio.

Concordia Studio

Concordia Studio is a talent-first studio, founded by Davis Guggenheim, Laurene Powell Jobs and Jonathan King, to produce and finance the most compelling storytelling with the most exciting creators.

The studio's 2020 Sundance Official Selections in competition included *Boys State* (Jesse Moss, Amanda McBaine) which won the U.S. Grand Jury Prize for Documentary and will be distributed this year through AppleTV+ and A24, *Time* (Garrett Bradley) which won the Directing Award for U.S. Documentary and will be distributed by Amazon Studios, *A Thousand Cuts* (Ramona S. Diaz), and *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets* (Bill Ross & Turner Ross) which screened at the 2020 Berlin International Film Festival. Other recent work includes *Inside Bill's Brain: Decoding Bill Gates* (Davis Guggenheim) for Netflix, Sundance premiered *Where's My Roy Cohn?* (Matt Tyrnauer) for Sony Pictures Classics, Sundance premiered *Bisbee '17* (Robert Greene), Sundance Grand Jury Prize Winning *The Price Of Free* (Derek Doneen) for YouTube Premium and *From Here to Home*, a series of shorts with the New York Times Op-Docs including Laura Nix's Oscar-nominated "Walk Run Cha-Cha."

Credits

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Credits

Directed by	Jesse Moss Amanda McBaine
Composer	T. Griffin
Director of Photography	Thorsten Thielow
Editor	Jeff Gilbert, ACE
Producers	Amanda McBaine Jesse Moss
Executive Producers	Laurene Powell Jobs Davis Guggenheim Jonathan Silberberg Nicole Scott
Co-Executive Producer	Shannon Dill
Photographed by	Patrick Bresnan Daniel Carter Ivy Chiu Wolfgang Held Jesse Moss Martina Radwan Claudia Raschke Thorsten Thielow

Credits

Assistant Camera	Ivy Chiu Henry David
Co-Editor	Michael Vollmann
Assistant Editor	Connor Hall
Post Production Supervisor	Christopher Noviello
Additional Assistant Editors	Chris Larson Sasha Flamm Michael Bourne Sam Kirchoff Ian Anderson Sarah Cannon Samantha Bennett
Trailer Editor	Traci Loth
Line Producer	Sarah Regan
Production Supervisor	George Sledge
DIT	Robert Burns, Jr. Chris Haley
Production Sound Recording	Mark Roy Drake Roy Martin Pedersen

Credits

Production Sound Recording Scott Anderson
Scott Snyder
Andrew Hulett
Tyler Hutcherson

Production Assistants Carrie Ostebo
Nick Wigg
Kristie Kyle
Learda Shkurti