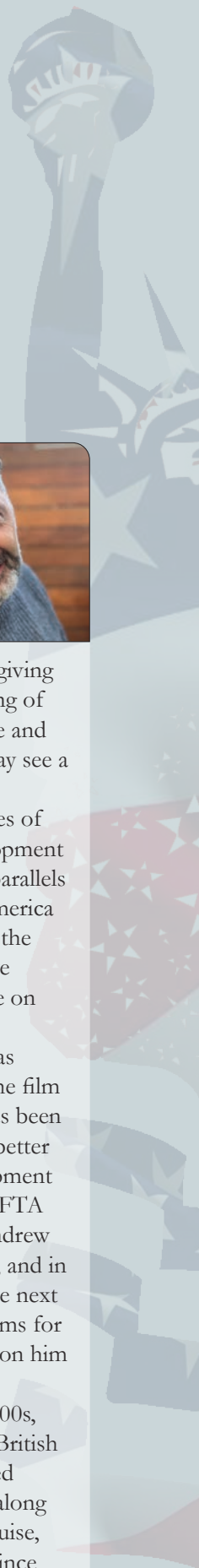


EXPLORING THE NARRATIVES IN **THE AMERICAN DREAM**



Curating this year's *From Page to Screen* film festival, **Andrew Chater** has tried to open up a conversation about an America that is fast becoming unrecognisable. He talked to **Fergus Byrne** about the films he has chosen and the diverse and complex nature of the country they represent.



As the burning embers from the Los Angeles fires contrasted with the melting snow drifts that caused havoc in southern America, citizens of the United States desperately tried to understand what would become of their country as their new president, Donald Trump, began to make his mark.

America is a country that was born on a vision of hope, a country built on the American Dream where every person had a right to work hard to make a success of their lives. Today, for many, that dream no longer exists. It is a fractured society, deeply divided, unsettled and nervous. And a nervous country, especially one with so much firepower, is a recipe for tense relationships.

In this year's *From Page to Screen* (FPTS) film festival, curator Andrew Chater, a Beaminster Director/Producer and lecturer on American History, is using his vast knowledge of American literature to create a programme that will open a conversation about the complexities of the United States of America.

It is an ambitious and vast undertaking, but Andrew's vision for the Bridport-based festival is to foster community engagement and discussion of American cultural diversity. The programme hopes to reflect on the broader implications of American societal issues, including the American Dream, and the importance of conversation in addressing these challenges.

He hopes that by stimulating debate about what

he describes as 'the nature of America', and giving audiences a little bit more of an understanding of some of the things which seem 'most strange and bewildering about America right now', we may see a 'reflection of our own situation.'

As we sit in his office surrounded by shelves of books revealing America's history and development through its literature, Andrew points to the parallels that we are facing in this country. He says America may be 'tearing itself apart' right now, but in the UK, we have a 'populist phenomenon that we haven't encountered before', and we could be on course for a similar journey.

Curating the Bridport-based film festival has given Andrew an opportunity to delve into the film adaptations of many of the books that he has been using to help his students in America gain a better perspective on the myriad strands of development of that vast country. The recipient of six BAFTA and two Royal Television Society Awards, Andrew joined the BBC as a graduate trainee in 1988, and in 1990 he joined BBC Education, where for the next six years he directed a wide variety of programs for schools, including *Shakespeare Shorts*, which won him his first BAFTA award.

According to BBC research, in the early 2000s, Andrew's output was being used by 75% of British secondary schools. Since then he has launched Lodestar Productions and Timelines.tv and, along with his Hollywood studio executive wife Louise, has lived between the UK and Los Angeles since



2011. As well as launching a new series called *Bookpackers* Andrew also teaches courses at the Faculty of English at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles.

The recent devastating fires in Los Angeles are not only a poignant reminder of the instability of politics in America, but they are also much closer to Andrew, who was due to leave for the next semester a couple of days after our meeting. The person he was going to stay with had been evacuated, and his daughter, although not near the fires, is also in LA.

With an original long list of 150 movies, Andrew has been trying to develop a way of understanding America's 'regional pathways'. He has blocks of books covering the whole country, from LA culture, New Orleans, and the Appalachians to New England and New York. 'The novels,' he says, 'help us understand the mentality of particular places.' He points out how different areas were founded by people 'centuries ago', and they all came with 'different motivations.' For example, the people of the Midwest arrived with different motivations to the people of New England, to the people of New York and to the people of the South. Those who went West, he says, were also a particular kind of people, 'and they took with them their own particular assumptions.'

Today, the map of America is predicated on all of these different composite parts, and many of them have radically different ideas about fundamental things. 'What does Liberty mean?' Andrew asks. 'Liberty up in the Northeast means the freedom from doing certain things. It's protecting yourself from bad stuff. It's creating utopias by curtailing some freedoms.' He describes it as the 'old Puritan lines.' While in the South, Liberty was perceived to be an incredibly hegemonic thing. 'We have freedom, but the enslaved people don't. Liberty is something we fight for, but we don't perceive it to be for everyone.'

'Whereas, in Appalachia,' he says, 'freedom is protecting the family against the incursions of everybody else.' He describes the Midwestern idea of tolerance as that of letting your neighbour be as your neighbour will be, and says that notion is a 'beautiful American thing, and that's the thing we're losing sight of now.'

Through the pathways that he has followed over America's literary journey, Andrew sees how the Appalachian version of Liberty, born out of

frontiersmen, feeds into a 'kind of selfish American ideal.' A theme now prevalent in more corporate settings, it shows how the power to economically succeed on money terms alone, is at the expense of society.

It might be easy to think of America as a somewhat parochial country with two strips of sophistication on either side. However, Andrew suggests that it is much more complex than that. 'The point is', he says, 'that we don't think of America as being this jigsaw of different mindsets, and only if we start to understand where it's come from do we get a sense of why it's at war with itself now, and what might emerge out of all these warring factions.'

Films that include *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Winter's Bone* and *The Day of the Locust* sit alongside *The Hate U Give*, *Nickel Boys*, and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. They are an adaptation of literature that lets us experience the lives of Americans. Andrew cites the Atticus Finch quote about walking a mile in another man's shoes to illustrate how reading stories from the perspective of people who think differently from ourselves allows us to question our own beliefs. 'How do I admire this person in spite of myself?' he asks. 'Do I admire this person, or do I empathise at least, or sympathise with where they're coming from?' He describes how children from very conservative backgrounds may 'better understand racial problems or societal malfunctions' and the things that fundamentally set us back as a society, 'and they start to see that maybe their parents' American dream is not the pure reality.'

Within the bubble of his classroom, he also sees how 'on the other hand, progressive kids, activist kids, kids who've been fed a very strident and limited worldview of war between identities are allowed to understand a slightly more old-fashioned notion of what nice Republicanism was.' The classroom space, although a bubble to begin with, becomes a place in which people from different backgrounds can actually talk across that divide and take their better understanding out into the world. 'We're just encouraging that process of conversation.'

From Page to Screen, the Bridport Film Festival runs from April 23rd to 27th. For full details and to book tickets visit: www.bridport-arts.com/fjpts/

