

SCREENS &amp; POP

## Film review: “Fugitive Dreams” Offers a Tempered Hope in Trying Times



Still from Fugitive Dreams

By **Erica Lies** October 16, 2020

At the opening of “Fugitive Dreams,” the directorial debut of Salvage Vanguard founder, Jason Neulander, a drifter (April Mathis) is on the verge of taking her life. That is, until another drifter (Robbie Tann) barrels into the gas station bathroom where she’s holding a piece of glass to her wrist and stops her, both literally and metaphorically.

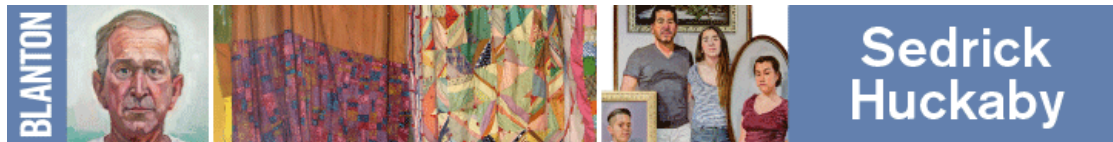
Over the next 90 minutes, the two — who we learn are named Mary and John—take up together to traverse the Midwest, hitching train cars without seeming to actually get anywhere new. At least not physically. Emotionally, John and Mary move from reluctant allies to chosen family.

Captured in gorgeous black and white cinematography, “[Fugitive Dreams](#)” has a surreal, dreamy quality, slipping in and out of the main characters’ traumatic memories and, in John’s case, following a frayed mental landscape where dream and reality interweave. The viewer can never be sure whether what they’re witnessing is real or in John’s head — and John can’t be, either.



It's difficult to describe the film's wandering plot, because it's largely beside the point. "Fugitive Dreams" is more concerned with its character study of Mary and John. Across their travels, the pair freighthops and trudges through an America that exists outside of time. They help each other through agonizing hunger, mental illness, and addiction and — despite some incredibly bleak turns — slowly gain hope as they mutually refuse to abandon the other.

Matthis delivers a perfect performance as Mary, sinking into the character of a woman who is done with life but slowly coming to care for the motormouth John. Mary is hardened, and depressed but anchored to reality, while John lives in fantasy even when discussing his memories. Their travels bring them in contact with others experiencing homelessness, some of whom exude an unsettling vibe, at once welcoming and menacing.



Originally a stage play by Caridad Svich, Neulander and Svich teamed up to adapt "Fugitive Dreams" to the screen. But this wasn't Neulander's first interaction with the story of Mary and John; he directed the stage version, titled "Fugitive Pieces," here in Austin back in 2002. After working on the live radio comedy, "Intergalactic Nemesis," for over 21 years, Neulander turned toward film projects, telling the [Austin Chronicle](#) in 2017 that he looked to his former stage directing for inspiration.

Re-reading the stage script for "Fugitive Pieces," Neulander said, made him emotional, and the story certainly carries a message of love in trying circumstances that feels ripe for the present moment. He explained that the decision to direct "Fugitive" for the screen was in part a reaction to our present political climate, and while production obviously preceded the pandemic, the film's small cast and stark backdrops feel almost perfectly suited to corona-times.

While it's tempting to compare "Fugitive Dreams" to the Coen Brothers, Neulander's project recalls films from an earlier era, and not just in the film's look. Primarily, Vittorio di Sica's 1951 comedy "Miracle in Milan" comes to mind. Though "Miracle" is a comedy and "Fugitive Dreams" is a drama (albeit one with some comic moments), the two explore similar themes. "Miracle" centers on a squatters' village where a homeless encampment is about to be destroyed for gentrification, and it delves into a magical surreality through

a fairylike dove that grants people whatever they desire. "Fugitive Dreams" has a similar sense of fantasy and hallucination blurring with reality, and while here it's not played for laughs, the duality drives home that when a person is experiencing homelessness, the only true escape is fantasy.

"Fugitive Dreams" suffers, however, from a few problems. At times, it merely hits on the idea of what it's like to experience homelessness rather than speaking from the lived nuance of it.

And its language, which undoubtedly works beautifully onstage where the lens can be larger and far more grandiose, sometimes hits false notes against the stark, realistic scenery.

Overall, it's worth watching for the message of hope of two people coming together in community despite innumerable odds.

"Fugitive Dreams" makes its U.S. premiere next week as part of the [Austin Film Festival](#) on October 24th. Purchase a ticket [to screen it at home virtually](#).

