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'Lucky U Ranch': Tucson made family film captivates with melancholy magic

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Junior McCaully (Trevor Robins) commiserates with his new pal Melissa Dixon (Donovan Droege) in the 1950's themed drama "Lucky U Ranch," screening throughout the 2016 Phoenix Film Festival.

Photo courtesy of Steve Anderson/Gizzmo Films

Lucky U Ranch (2015)

Rating: ★★★★★

It's a spring afternoon in 1953 as awkward and overweight 11-year-old Junior McCaully (**Trevor Robins**) walks slowly through the Arizona desert. Angrily casting his school books away he

steps onto the railroad tracks and rests his head on the hot iron of the track, listening for the train. Flashbacks reveal another day filled with insults, humiliation and failure at his school. As the train audibly approaches, Junior is thrust back into reality and nauseated by what he was about to do. Defeated, he gathers his belongings and heads for his home in the trailer park; the dented, dilapidated death of the **Lucky U Ranch**. His hardworking mom Coco (**Harris Kendall**) plies him with junk food to get him to open up about his bad day. But Junior really wants to know more about his missing father, whom Junior has never seen and mom is reluctant to talk about. An Airstream pulls into the space next to Junior's trailer and we are harshly introduced to neglected yet kind hearted 11-year-old Melissa Dixon (**Donovan Droege**), her perpetually drunken father Cliff (**Brendan Guy Murphy**) and her abusive, equally drunken mother Wanda (**Maria Gawne**). Melissa and Junior bond instantly, spending time together sharing their bleak, frail outlook and their desire to dramatically escape their hopelessness. As the two become close friends, they instill in each other the fragile confidence that their lives may one day, ever so slightly, mildly improve. Junior continues to fantasize about his own heroic exploits; rescuing abducted children from kidnappers and being reunited with his father. Meanwhile, doormat Melissa escapes endless abuse hurled at her from her mother by secretly returning to the two things she misses the most; her ballet and her love of baseball.

Dreams and aspirations arrive at the **Lucky U Ranch** and wait there in a dusty, metallic purgatory of rotting wooden furniture and oozing septic effluent. Bordered on one side by a ghostly hobo camp, the other side, a cemetery; the residents of Lucky U Ranch have no idea why they are there, or where they are going to. Unable to depart or even move on with their lives until the missing piece to their karmic puzzle is located and put into place. As Junior and Melissa grow closer to each other, the nearby train is heard, often at the most inopportune times. The mournful sound is never lost on the children; an eerie, painful reminder that there are two ways the train will help them escape their sadness: on it and heading into the dark unknown, or standing in front of it. Melissa teaches Junior how to hit a baseball, and Junior teaches Melissa how to play Jacks. But when their playtime is over, they journey into the inevitable dark places they can not escape. Coaxed and baited by the train whistle, the children speak of vanishing in the night, never to return. Melissa describes a dysfunctional family that will never be whole again, while Junior struggles with thoughts of homicide.

The performances in **Lucky U Ranch** are phenomenal and a joy to watch. Harris Kendall as

Coco is both a fascinating and tragic character, a unifying force in the film, and certainly in the life of melancholy Junior. She spends hours preparing her hair and makeup in order to be ready for the man that may one day return to her. At night, when the facade is removed, a defeated chain smoking glycerine covered automaton is all that remains, unwilling and unable to explain to her son why he doesn't have a father. Trevor Robins and Donovan Droege are outstanding in Lucky U Ranch, bringing a perfectly balanced collection of talent and abilities to their characters; neither trying to outdo the other in cuteness or sadness, but playing perfectly off of each other as they relate their relentless dysthymia. They aren't interested in heroically helping each other get out of their funk, more like just trying to come to terms with it. While screenwriter/executive producer **Ginia Desmond** incorporates a fair amount of her own experiences living in a trailer park in 1950's Arizona, she clearly set her sights on telling an engaging, somber tale created to elicit empathy and identity from the audience, deliberately avoiding a strictly feel good nostalgic romp recalling cheerful memories of days gone by.

There is a lot to like about Lucky U Ranch: the outstanding photography, superb performances, masterful lighting and flawless set design and costumes. But this film is clearly a lock, stock and two blazing barrels by the outstanding direction of **Mr. Steve Anderson**. Anderson brings his distinct filmmaking style to Lucky U Ranch with unrestrained mastery. A consistent neo-realist, defeated optimism that is the trademark of his work; the sad susurrus and dreamy moonlit undercurrent that gently whisks you away to the places where light is plentiful, yet only the darkness illuminates. The painstaking detail Anderson brings to every shot terrifies and tranquilizes, mystifies and mortifies. At times, the action is concentrated on a scant one quarter of the screen separated by a stark and very distinct vertical line that divides the rest of the scene, the other three quarters of the screen filled with a colorful yet lifeless void that cries out for human occupation. Anderson establishes the dour tone of the film and the mysterious metallic antagonist from the very first scene as we watch Junior from high above, with the ever present train whistle rapidly approaching. Lucky U Ranch is both an excellent example of Arizona indie filmmaking and a memorable film as well, bursting with talent and created solely with the audience in mind. A fantastic film made for the whole family. Don't miss Lucky U Ranch screening during the **2016 Phoenix Film Festival** Saturday, April 9 at 12:55 p.m., Monday, April 11 at 2:45 p.m., and Wednesday, April 13 at 9:20 p.m.

Final Take - Airstream zeitgeist.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- [Arizona Filmmaker Showcase March: Satanists, secrets, memo walls and volleyballs](#)
- [Arizona Filmmaker Showcase January: Piñatas and prostitutes, aliens and entities](#)
- [Centennial Sunday: 5 of the 'AZ 100 Indie Film Projects' you can watch for free](#)
- [Five Film Friday: 5 of the most notable AZ indie films of 2015](#)
- [ASU Fall 2015 Capstones: Have a heapin' helpin' of some faith-based films](#)



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