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'A Lien' Writer-Directors David & Sam Cutler-Kreutz On Combining Anxiety And Empathy In Their Oscar Nominated Short Film

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February 11, 2025 11:30am



Victoria Ratermanis as Sophie in 'A Lien'

Lefty Films/Willa

A Lien, written and directed by brothers David and Sam Cutler-Kreutz, brings audiences into the fraught and complex experience that a noncitizen can go through in the U.S. legalization process. Clocking in at just under 15 minutes, the story follows a young couple (Victoria Ratermanis and William Martinez) navigating their Green Card interview at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office. The appointment starts off simple enough, until Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) takes a turn for the worse, putting the couple and their young daughter in unexpected danger.

In addition to being executive produced by politically conscious filmmaker Adam McKay, *A Lien* snagged an Oscar nomination for Best Live Action Short Film and garnered a Grand Prize Narrative Award from the Washington Film Festival.

Here, the Cutler-Kreutz brothers talk to Deadline about capturing the heart-wrenching process of becoming a U.S. Citizen.

DEADLINE: *The film takes place during President Trump's first term. When did you actually start filming?*

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: Cameras were rolling sometime in the summer of '21.

DEADLINE: *What led you both to creating this film? Do you have any personal attachments to this subject matter?*

DAVID CUTLER-KREUTZ: Sam and I are always in conversation about films and ideas in general — we're always throwing stuff back and forth. We learned about this specific entrapment process in 2018 through an article that we read. And it just struck both of us immediately. And it kept coming back into our conversations, and we just kept saying, "This is crazy that this happens here in the U.S.," that there's this catch-22 entrapment process that we knew nothing about and isn't really in dialogue with the conversation around immigration. It struck both of us as, "What can we do to try and advocate and shine light on this process?"

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: One of the things that spoke to us about this process in particular is, there was something about the twisting of the rules, the almost banal cruelty of the unfairness of it. Along with the people's attempts to do everything [right] and still be [taken away] after that. I think in some ways it felt like it not only represented this process and these people's stories, but it represented the whole immigration system and the systemic problems that exist. It stood for the larger issues, even though it was a very small and specific story that we can tell in a short film. And so I think as we, as artists, are trying to soak up the cultural zeitgeist around us and find ways to reshape it and crystallize it and put it out in front of viewers and maybe make them think about something that they hadn't thought about before. This film and the article we read seemed like it was the interesting nexus of all those things in a place where filmmakers like us are like, "Oh, that's a real goldmine for a story that is really impactful to people." And it has been impactful.

DAVID CUTLER-KREUTZ: It also set us on a journey to really dive into research and into talking to people who had gone through the process and similar processes. We also talked to lawyers to ask about approaching this topic. This film was really made in general through basically no money. Everyone just did it because they really thought it was important. And so many of the folks on set had either gone through this process themselves or a very similar process. And I think in general it was really crafted to say, "Hey, how do we make sure that this film feels really aligned with the experiences of many, many folks who go through these types of processes to make sure that what we're depicting feels really aligned with that?"

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: The response we've had in general across the board has been people who come up to us and say, "This really captures my experience," or a similar experience in the Green Card process or in the immigration system.

DEADLINE: Was there ever a thought to make this into a documentary instead?

DAVID CUTLER-KREUTZ: The thing that's hard about the documentary space, with this especially, is that it's quite challenging to capture the moments we wanted to. So much of this process is so uncertain. You could go in and have your Green Card interview and everything is totally fine, or you could go in and everything could go wrong and you just don't know. You're playing this Russian roulette style game to say, "I'm going to go in, I'm going to try and follow the rules. And I might be fine and I might not be fine, and I just don't know." It just depends on the day and it depends on ICE's schedule and stuff like that. And so I think for us it felt like we weren't going to be able to show some of the moments that we felt were really important to make an impactful movie.

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: There's a question around access as well. I also think that we are narrative filmmakers at heart. We're not documentary filmmakers. Those are skills that we don't have. Narrative films are skills that we do have through the way we engage with the world and tell stories, that's our medium personally. However, we tried really hard to create a documentary-esque vibe on set where we were building these scenes live and they're happening in front of us. And we had a very intentional shot list of what we were going to shoot. Andrea [Gavazzi], our amazing Italian cinematographer, came to the scene with the camera on his shoulder and picking off shots. And then we'd cut and then go look back through the footage and through the shots and think, "OK, we've got these shots, we've got to go back and get these shots," and we'd run it again. And so we almost filmed it as if it was a documentary. Victoria [Ratermanis], our lead actress, has spoken about this a little bit, saying that the immersive on set [atmosphere] allowed everyone to be in the process in a way that was successful for the film.



William Martinez as Oscar in *A Lien*

LEFTY FILMS/WILLA

DEADLINE: *Talk more about the vibe captured on screen. There's a lot of technical camerawork going into evoking anxiety and the multistep process of going through government facilities. How did you go about creating this feeling?*

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: One of the things that we really thought about was, at its core, the film is a film about documents. It's basically a film about paperwork. And our question to each other when we were prepping the film was like, "How do we make a paperwork horror film?" So given that question, we went in trying to understand, "How do we use the language of thriller and horror to bring us to this moment?" This bureaucratic heavy moment. We spent a lot of time talking to Andrea about how we restrict people's vision. And again, if you watch the film, the lenses get longer and longer as we go tighter and tighter and deeper and deeper into the taupe labyrinth, which is the underbelly of these buildings as everyone descends down to these hallways that are never ending.

I think with Andrea it really was a question of, as the characters, their vision gets more and more focused and the walls close in around them, the claustrophobia builds. And I think we were trying to really elevate that ourselves with the camera work and with the lens choices. On top of that, it was our goal and responsibility to try to put the viewer into the shoes of the main characters. We asked ourselves, "How do we get people who don't know about this situation into Sophie and Oscar's shoes?" So some of the extreme close-ups in the way it was shot were all in the service of really putting you into the process and not having you feel like an observer necessarily, but actually feeling like you're part of it as it's going along.

DAVID CUTLER-KREUTZ: We really thought and talked a lot about the claustrophobia of the buildings, of the process, of the paperwork of it. Feeling like you're constantly in these almost trapping hallways, these just piles of numbers of paperwork that you can't decipher. This numbered waiver and this form and that form, and that maw of paperwork and hallways and doors. We were thinking about making—

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: A Kafka-esque nightmare, if you will.

DEADLINE: *How did you work with Victoria and William Martinez to create the performance needed for this?*

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: Will and Victoria were incredible. They're amazing actors. There's always a question in a short film of whether you should try and find a big actor to be in the film to raise the profile or whatever. But one of the things I love about Will and Victoria is, because they are not A-list actors, you believe them as their characters so strongly. And we spent almost six or eight months casting. We looked at 6,000 people just to pull the two of them out of that process. It was a gigantic reverse funnel that led to the single couple. And they went through a million rounds of auditions, self-tapes, chemistry reads and more chemistry reads and then in-person chemistry

reads. We really tried to find two people who felt like they match each other and were connected and felt in love. But also, a couple that you could buy as a family off the bat, people that feel real. They're just amazing actors. We're so excited that they were able to be in the project and work with us.

DAVID CUTLER-KREUTZ: Yeah, they stood out, for sure.



Victoria Ratermain as Sophie in *A Lien*

LEFTY FILMS/WILLA

DEADLINE: *What would you like people to consider as they watch A Lien for the first time?*

DAVID CUTLER-KREUTZ: A huge hope for us is that the film really promotes conversation around [immigration]. When we think about immigration, it's so easy to think about numbers and statistics on a much broader level. But at the end of the day, immigration, and this film, is just about family. It's about taking your kid to school, it's about cooking dinner with each other. A huge part of our intention in this film is just to remind folks that immigration can be all of this paperwork and a whole labyrinth [of complications] but at its heart, immigration is just about people trying to spend time with their loved ones. I also think, especially in this country right now where there's such a conversation around immigration, it feels like such an important moment to continue to just push for an immigration system that is for people and that is humane and that is, at its core, not about numbers, but at its core about families.

SAM CUTLER-KREUTZ: You can watch this film, I think, from either side of the political spectrum. And I don't think you can disagree with the choices being made by the people in the film. They're making the most logical choices that they can, given the information that they know. Everyone in the film, from Sophie and Oscar, all the way up to the ICE agents, to the officials behind the desks, everybody is working to their own interest and to their own motives that makes sense to them. I think if you have a group of people all working to do the best thing for them, there are still problems, and problems with the system and not the people. For us, it's about trying to give people a way to look at the system and say that there's a problem in the way the system is structured. We as Americans, we get to choose how we want to make our country and how we want the system to be and tell our leaders what we want. It's about allowing everyone, no matter where you are politically, to think about that and engage in a dialogue with your fellow American to say, "Hey, how do we want to make this thing? How do we want the country to be?"