



Immersion

Moises, a ten-year-old immigrant who speaks no English,
struggles to fit in at his new school in the U.S.

Total Running Time: 14 minutes
Color, Stereo

Written and Directed by Richard Levien
Produced by Richard Levien, Kit Fox, Zareen Poonen Levien

Publicity / Sales: please contact:

Richard Levien
(510) 610 2900 (cell)
richard.levien@gmail.com
www.immersionfilm.com

Short Synopsis / Log Line

Moises, a ten-year-old immigrant who speaks no English, struggles to fit in at his new school in the U.S.

Longer Synopsis:

Ten-year-old Moises has just immigrated to California from Mexico. He doesn't speak English, but he's good at math, so he hopes to do well on his first math test in the USA. Using untrained child actors from public schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, “Immersion” plunges its audience into the visceral experience of a child who cannot understand his teacher.

“Immersion” Long Synopsis:

Ten-year-old Moises has just moved to California from Mexico. He’s looking forward to the math test today because he’s very good at math. His family is excited for him at the breakfast table. He walks to school before dawn, with his brother Luis. Luis goes inside the school, while Moises sits outside the school gate to study and wait for school to open.

In class, Moises is confused about whether the test is starting – he doesn’t speak any English. Then he finds out the math test is mostly word problems, in English. Working at great speed, he uses posters on the walls, his bilingual friend Alicia, and his dictionary to help him understand one word problem, and he gets the right answer. But Enrique poaches the answer from him and he ends up being embarrassed in front of the class.

At recess Moises appeals to his teacher, Ms. Peterson, for a Spanish version of the test, but she doesn’t know what to do and tells him not to worry about the test.

Ms. Peterson tries to persuade the principal to translate the test, but he reminds her they are not even supposed to talk to the kids in Spanish. Moises plays kickball at recess. He gets out when he doesn’t understand the rules for today. Enrique teases Moises’ brother Luis, and Moises nearly gets into a fight with Enrique. Moises meets Gerardo, who is planning to skip the test and go to the park. Moises says he will join Gerardo.

Ms. Peterson looks in a storage room for a test in Spanish, but can’t find one. As Moises waits in the bathroom for Gerardo, he remembers jumping over a fence at night with his mother on his way to California. The wind is howling, and his mother gets stuck on the fence, but Moises is having the time of his life.

Gerardo says the coast is clear, but Moises says he has to take the test. He doesn’t know why, since as Gerardo says, he’s just going to fail.

Moises answers the first page of the math test, which is all arithmetic. But the rest of the test is all word problems. Moises’ usual aids are not available to him. The posters on the walls are covered up with paper, Alicia’s desk has been moved far away from him, and

Ms. Peterson reluctantly has to confiscate his dictionary. She tells Moises he can ask her any questions, but they both know it won't help him on this test. Moises sees his brother Luis washing the class windows – he's a janitor at the school. Luis gives him a big thumbs up, still expecting him to do well on the test. Moises gives him a half smile, and goes back to starting blankly at the test.

Screenings and awards:

"Immersion" won the "No Violence" award at the Ann Arbor film festival, and the Golden Gate award for Best Bay Area short film at the San Francisco International Film Festival. It has also screened or will screen at the Slamdance, Aspen Shortsfest, Palm Springs International Shortfest, Seattle International, Cinequest, New Zealand International, Media that Matters, LA Shorts Fest, Sarasota, Chicago International Children's, Arizona International, Cucalorus, Mill Valley, South Alabama, Mendocino, and Brussels International Independent Film Festivals. It has also received a grant from the Fleishhacker Foundation to support our ongoing outreach and education program.

"Immersion" is being screened by educators and English Language Learner advocates around the U.S. Here are some examples:

- "Immersion" screened at the 2010 César Chávez Conference on Literacy & The Professional Teacher, California State University Fresno, Saturday May 1, 2010. In addition to the screening and Q & A, there was a breakout session on filmmaking and social justice issues in schools.
- "Immersion" showed at the California Association for Bilingual Education (CABE) 2010 Annual Conference, March 10-13, 2010. There was a panel discussion about the issues "Immersion" raises, and about using "Immersion" in the classroom.
- On 11/7/09 and 11/8/09, "Immersion" screened in Woodland and Davis, hosted by the Yolo County ACLU. There were lively panel discussions that centered around local English Language Learner issues.
- On 8/19/09, "Immersion" screened at the California State Capitol in Sacramento. The screening was co-sponsored by Californians Together (which advocates for more support for English Languages Learners), Senator Gloria Romero (who is the Senate Education Committee Chair), and the California Latino Legislative Caucus and the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus. The meeting was about Coachella Valley Unified School District v. The State of California, a Court of Appeal case to try to get the State of California to test children who speak no English in their native language. At least nine other states do test children in languages other than English, including New York, Texas, Colorado and Oregon. Actor Luis Bautista was on hand to answer questions about his experience in the school system, and director Richard Levien received a Resolution of the California Legislature honoring "Immersion".
- In June 2009, "Immersion" was used by the NAACP legal defense fund, for their outreach about the Supreme Court case *Horne v. Flores*. A group of parents and students filed this case to address significant inadequacies in the ELL program of

the Nogales, Arizona Unified School District.
(see <http://www.naacpldf.org/content.aspx?article=1425>).

Director's Statement (why we made the film)

We should replace bilingual education with immersion in English so people learn the common language of the country and they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto.

- Newt Gingrich, March 31, 2007

How to educate new immigrant children is a hotly debated topic in the USA, and worldwide. But the debate rarely considers the personal stories of new immigrants. Three years ago, producer Zareen Levien was volunteering in a 5th grade classroom. For months a boy sat at the back, not participating at all. Like 25% of Californian children, he was an English Language Learner (ELL). He had just arrived from Mexico and didn't speak any English. The teacher was excellent, but didn't speak Spanish. In a public school class with 30 students, she had little time to spend with him.

California's policy of "structured English immersion" allows this boy only 1 year of additional English language instruction. After that, he's expected to be at the same level as his classmates. Research indicates that it takes 5-7 years to develop academic English fluency.

"Immersion" shows a bright boy who, for no fault of his own, is sinking. The film aims to start conversations about educating immigrant children, and to give people who may have no experience of trying to learn in another language, an insight into how difficult this can be.

Biographies:

Richard Levien – Writer / Director / Editor

Richard Levien has a PhD in theoretical physics from Princeton University, but has found his real passion in film. As a freelance film editor, he co-edited the feature documentary "D Tour", which won the Golden Gate award for Best Bay Area documentary at the 2009 San Francisco International Film Festival, and will appear on the PBS series Independent Lens in Fall 2009. He edited and did motion graphics for the short film "On the Assassination of the President" which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008. He also edited the cult internet hit "Store Wars", which was seen by 5.5 million people in the first 6 weeks of its release.

Levien's first film as a director is "Immersion" (2009), a short film about a ten-year-old immigrant from Mexico who speaks no English, and struggles to fit in at his new school in the U.S. "Immersion" won the "No Violence" award at the Ann Arbor film festival, and the Golden Gate award for Best Bay Area short film at the San Francisco International Film Festival. It has also screened or will screen at the Slamdance, Aspen Shortsfest, Palm Springs International Shortfest, Seattle International, New Zealand International, Media that Matters, LA Shorts Fest, Sarasota, Arizona International, Cucalorus, Mill Valley, and Brussels International Independent Film Festivals.

At the same festival, Levien won the \$35,000 San Francisco Film Society/Kenneth Rainin Foundation Filmmaking Grant, the first in a cycle of grants that will infuse \$3 million dollars into narrative feature filmmaking in the Bay Area in the next five years. Levien won for screenwriting and script development of "La Migra", the story of an 11-year-old girl whose mother has been taken away by U.S. immigration police. He is working with author Malín Alegria on this project.

Levien was born in Auckland, New Zealand in 1968. He enjoys a good cup of tea and follows the (mostly ill) fate of the New Zealand cricket team. He is one of the few New Zealanders who played no part whatsoever in the making of the Lord of the Rings film trilogy.

Zareen Levien – Producer

It was while volunteering one day a week in a 5th grade classroom that Levien realized she enjoyed her time with the children more than her high-profile product management role at Yahoo!. She decided to try her hand at teaching high school biology in a poorly funded charter school in Oakland, and had the time of her life.

Levien recently completed her MA in Education at U.C. Berkeley, to complement her BS in Symbolic Systems from Stanford. She is now teaching 3rd grade at César Chávez Elementary in San Francisco. She is fluent in Spanish, and in her vanishingly small spare time she sings in the band "Los Boleros".

Kit Fox – Producer

Kit Fox is a native of San Francisco and has produced several other short films that have screened around the world. These include "Little Failures", directed by John Dilley, which premiered at Sundance 2003 where it was an Official Selection. It was also an Official Selection at France's Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival, which has been heralded as one of the most important short film festivals in the world. The film went on to screen at the LA Film Festival, and the STARZ Denver Film Festival, among others. In 2006, it was featured in a program of work by emerging filmmakers at the Cinémathèque Française in Paris.

Fox also produced John Dilley's second film, "How To Be Popular", which is based on a thought-provoking New York Times Magazine article. The short had its premiere at the 2008 San Francisco Independent Film Festival, and is screening at various festivals around the country, most recently the New York/Avignon Film Festival and the Newport Beach Film Festival. "How to be Popular" aired on PBS in March.

Frazer Bradshaw – Cinematographer

Frazer Bradshaw has photographed a wide variety of commercial and experimental media projects, from features, documentaries and commercials to animation and experimental films. He also teaches cinematography classes at Film Arts Foundation in San Francisco.

Simultaneous with his success as a cinematographer, Bradshaw has continued to direct his own work: narrative, documentary and experimental. His films have played at film festivals throughout the world. His debut feature film as director, "Everything Strange and New" will premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009.

His recent short, "Every Day Here" has earned him a name as a director in the independent film world, premiering at the Sundance Film Festival and subsequently playing the exclusive New York Film Festival in 2000. Bradshaw's follow up, "Could Have Been Utah", won a jury prize at the San Francisco International Film Festival and also garnered the honor of being screened at the New York Film Festival. Another recent film, "The End of Summer" premiered at the exclusive Ann Arbor Film Festival and has played dozens of festivals internationally. "The End of Summer" was broadcast on HBO.

Luis Bautista – Lead Actor (Moises)

Luis Bautista is 11 years old. He was discovered during casting outreach for "Immersion" that reached over 1000 children in public schools in San Francisco and Oakland. Bautista was in 5th grade at César Chávez Elementary, where the film was shot. He now attends middle school in the Mission district of San Francisco, where he lives. He is as talented at soccer and math as he is at acting, and he loves video games.

Bautista has never acted before, but he proved to be a natural during the extensive rehearsal process and on the set. He is particularly adept at “switching off” between takes, acting like a normal 11-year-old and joking around with the crew and other cast members, then snapping right into character on “Action”.

Like Moises, the boy he plays in “Immersion”, Bautista is an English Language Learner. He is extremely bright and learning fast, and his English is much better than director Levien’s poor Spanish. However communication was not always easy. Luckily Bautista was such a natural that Levien quickly realized all he had to do was tell Bautista where to stand and walk and when to start, and Bautista would do the rest.

Theodora Dunlap – Lead Actor (Ms. Peterson)

Theodora Dunlap is thrilled to have been a part of "Immersion." It is a film that she feels very passionately about and was a joy to make. She has enjoyed acting on both coast and presently resides in New York City. She has a B.A. from the University of Washington and has studied acting at New York University, the American Conservatory Theater, National Theatre Conservatory Theatre at the Denver Center, and various studios throughout NYC. Theodora is originally from Southern Oregon and credits her family as the one thing that makes anything possible.

Gerardo Acevedo – Actor (Gerardo)

Gerardo Acevedo, 11, was discovered during the script research phase of “Immersion”, when writer / director Richard Levien met Gerardo’s father Nabor, who coaches a soccer team for children in Oakland’s predominantly Latino Fruitvale district. Even more than playing soccer, Gerardo has always wanted to act, and he finally got his chance in “Immersion”. Acevedo is now actively pursuing his acting career, in part through Be. Productions in Oakland.

Production Notes

Casting

Casting was probably the most important part of making “Immersion”. The search to find Moises and his classmates took several months. Director Richard Levien visited the twelve elementary schools in Oakland and San Francisco with the highest Latino enrollment. These are also schools where the vast majority of students are poor enough to qualify for free lunches. He spoke in every 4th and 5th grade classroom. He encouraged the children to make their own films, using the child filmmaking exploits of Levien’s countryman Peter Jackson as an example. “Who’s seen Lord of the Rings” and “Guess how old the filmmaker was when he made his first film” (correct answer: 8 years old) turned out to be good conversation-starters. Of course, the children were also encouraged to participate in “Immersion”. Auditions were held either at the school, or at a nearby public library that the children were familiar with. Levien was able to talk to over one

thousand children this way, and on average more than one child from each class visited showed up for auditions. Most had never acted before, and very few had ever been to an audition. Because so many children were needed for the classroom and playground scenes, children who did not get principal roles were still able to participate in the film if they wanted to. Throughout the process, the filmmakers wanted the experience to be an empowering one for all the children involved. They are very happy to be bringing two of those children, Luis Bautista (Moises) and Gerardo Acevedo (Gerardo) to attend the film's premiere at the Slamdance Film Festival in January 2009.

Working with Luis Bautista

Lead actor Luis Bautista (Moises) had no acting experience before "Immersion", but is a naturally gifted actor. Early on in the shoot, Levien was directing a shot in which Moises looks through his classroom window at his brother, who happens to be a janitor at the same school. It's the last shot of the movie: the end of a hard day for Moises. On the very first take, Bautista smiled just a little. Levien quickly stepped in and asked Bautista whether he thought Bautista's character would be smiling at the end of such a tough day. Bautista duly lost the smile for the subsequent takes.

Fortunately Levien was able to watch the dailies that night, and realized that the tiny ghost of a smile Bautista had on that first take made it ten times better than the subsequent ones. Luckily Levien realized at that point that Bautista understood the character of Moises much better than he did. This made sense, since like Moises, Bautista has had to struggle with learning English and adjusting to a new culture. From then on, Bautista was encouraged to go with his impulses and improvisations, to the great benefit of the movie.

What directors do ...

Like most of the cast of "Immersion", lead actor Luis Bautista, ten years old, had never acted before. This didn't prevent him from quickly figuring out how a film set worked. At the end of a grueling day, working under lights on a dark and cold San Francisco street, director Richard Levien exhorted cast and crew for one last effort to complete the final shot. Bautista watched as the crew scrambled to make this happen, while Levien looked anxiously at the time. "You don't do anything" he said. "You just say 'Action'".

On the bleeding edge of technology (a nerdy technical note)...

Just a few days before production started, the decision was made to use the new RED digital cinema camera instead of super 16 mm film. As production unfolded with the cast of untrained child actors, that decision was justified time after time. The naturalistic style we were aiming for suited the look of the RED camera, and we were able to run take after take without turning the camera off, a method that would have been prohibitively expensive shooting film. However when it came to post-production, there was the rude

realization that there were no standardized workflows for this camera. We went with the most conservative approach, to immediately convert the camera raw files to a more standard format (Apple's Prores 422 codec). But the render took one second for each frame, or around 200 hours for the whole film, before we could begin editing.

Full Cast and Credits List:

written, directed & edited by
Richard Levien

produced by
Kit Fox
Richard Levien
Zareen Poonen Levien

executive producers
Tamas Bojtor
Pascal Demko
John Levien and Rae Robinson

director of photography
Frazer Bradshaw

"Por Amor"

written by Pablo Castro Navarro
by kind permission of T.N. Ediciones Musicales
dba Los Tigres Del Norte, Inc.
performed by Los Tigres Del Norte
courtesy of Universal Music Enterprises

script consultant
Adam Keker

additional script consulting
John Dilley
William Farley
Lisa Rosenberg
Christopher Upham

editorial consulting
John Dilley
Adam Keker

principal cast
Luis Bautista - Moises
Theodora Dunlap – Ms. Peterson
Gerardo Acevedo - Gerardo
Lewis Hernandez - Luis
Ben Ortega – Principal Rosa
Angela Carlos de Silin - Mother

Vanessa Hernandez - Alicia
Johnny Jimenez - Enrique
Nabor Acevedo - Father
Luis Cervantes - Pitcher
Sherrie Saechao - Michelle
Mario Villalta - Johnny
Camryn Torres – Camryn
Fernando Rosales - Catcher
Saúl Cortez - Kicker
Michelle Alvarez – Bunny ears girl
Antonio Acosta – Janitor
Joe Flores - Joe
Antonio Nunez – Senior Janitor
Galo Tobar – Voice of Running Man

additional students

Ellen Cavanaugh
Jocelyn Espinoza
Xochitl Galaviz
Paula Garcia
Renee Hansemann
Bexy Hernandez
Courtney DOUNG-THI HITT
Alahna Horne
Victor Huerta
Chris Magallanes
Angelina Mah
Scarlet Maya
Shari Nishijima
Josue Pineda
Joselin Roque
Benjamin Saechao
Kevin Umanzor
Michelle Villagran
Bry'ana Wallace

production manager
Kit Fox

associate producers

Gino Caputi
John Dilley
Laura Techera Francia

assistant director

Zareen Poonen Levien

production sound
Jim Granato

art director
Truckee Lynch

art department assistant
Sharon Jue

costumes
Cody Caronna

hair & makeup
Maggie Dilley

script supervisor
Ryan Damm

assistant camera
Tim Kerns

gaffers
Gordon McIver
Carlos Lopez
Darrell Lee

key grip
Christian Gainsley

grips
Adam Barczak
John Bastian

set photography
Dan Gomes
Jen Hale
Julia Roberston

dialog consultant
Lewis Hernandez

production assistants
Arlene del Orbe
Katie Dilley
Elia Dominguez

Robin Fox
Vivian Hsieh
Ayumi Negishi
Nina Ravizza
Niki Ren

audio post production
Berkeley Sound Artists

sound design and mix
Alex Wilmer

color grader
Gary Coates

graphic design
Sam Elzway

logo design
John Givens

special thanks

John Levien and Rae Robinson
Adam Keker
John Dilley
Pascal Demko
Tamas Bojtor
Shannon and Mel Guymon

Billy Charlton and Trigby Perea
Stephan Friedrich
Joe Greenstein
Marie Levien
Tom Levien and Kirsten Thorp
Lauren Marotte
Salim Nasser
George and Karena Poonen
Stephen Smith
Pippa Styles and Alistair Cran

Nabor & Ricardo Acevedo
Antonio Acosta
Geri Almanza
Adelina Aramburo
Alfredo Centeno

Julie Chavez
Courtney Cook
Vincent Cortez
Lisa Costello
Matthew Delucia-Zeltzer
Nick Duran
Alex Estrada
William Farley
Stuart Fox
Christian Gainsley
Lynnette Gryseels
Jeanie Haigh
Manuel Herrera
Phil Jaber
Jessica Jung
Diane Karagienakos
Diego Montalvo
Ron Merk
Holly Million
Anita Monga
Jonathan Parra
Della Peretti
Cassie Powell
Candace Roberts
Raquel Rodriguez Jones
David Santamaria
Liz Scotta
Daniel Segura
Peter Villaseñor
Abby Winnick
Neil Wise

César Chávez Elementary School

Ascend Elementary School
Bay Area Casting News
Bryant Elementary School
Casting Networks SF
César Chávez Public Library, Oakland
Dolores Huerta Learning Academy
Flynn Elementary School
International Community School
Jefferson Elementary School
Lazear Elementary School
Livermore Film Office
Los Tigres Del Norte

Marshall Elementary School
Melrose Elementary School
Mission Education Center
Muse Media Center
Philz Coffee
Primera Iglesia Bautista
San Francisco Film Office
Think College Now Elementary School
Trader Joe's
The Unity Council
Universal Music Enterprises
Waste Management, Inc.

sponsored by

Film Arts Foundation

&

San Francisco Film Society

A Widdershins Film / Don't Foam production
© 2009

www.immersionfilm.com