‘Lies Are the Scaffolding to the American Dream’: Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz on ‘When Big People Lie’

BY TIM MILLER | UPDATED: AUGUST 1, 2022

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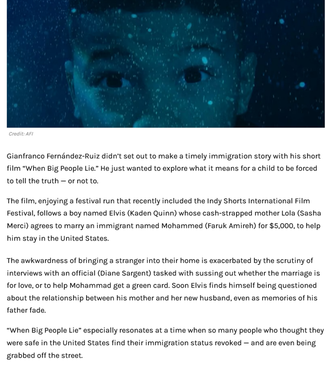


Credit: AFI

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz didn’t set out to make a timely immigration story with his short film “When Big People Lie.” He just wanted to explore what it means for a child to be forced to tell the truth — or not to.

The film, enjoying a festival run that recently included the Indy Shorts International Film Festival, follows a boy named Elvis (Kaden Quinn) whose cash-strapped mother Lola (Sasha Merci) agrees to marry an immigrant named Mohammed (Faruk Amireh) for $5,000, to help him stay in the United States.

The awkwardness of bringing a stranger into their home is exacerbated by the scrutiny of interviews with an official (Diane Sargent) tasked with sussing out whether the marriage is for love, or to help Mohammad get a green card. Soon Elvis finds himself being questioned about the relationship between his mother and her new husband, even as memories of his father fade.

“When Big People Lie” especially resonates at a time when so many people who thought they were safe in the United States find their immigration status revoked — and are even being grabbed off the street.

Like many if not all real-life immigration stories, “When Big People Lie” is filled with nuance and complications. We most often see Latinos targeted by ICE, but in the case of the film, it is Lola, a Latina, who holds the power of citizenship, and her son, Elvis, who holds the key to Mohammed’s future.

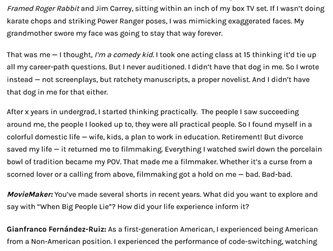
“I wanted to make this with my own personal experience top of mind, nothing else, but all of its themes on immigration in our current landscape really made it more pointed, more of a topical piece,” says Fernández-Ruiz. “That wasn’t really my intention. I wanted to explore what a lie was to a child and really live in that perspective, because for children, behavior is unilateral.”

The film pits “one’s innocence against an immigrant perspective” that often requires people to lie in order to stay in the United States.

Fernández-Ruiz, a Black and Latino filmmaker who grew up in Boston and now lives in Los Angeles, recently completed his MFA at AFI Conservatory. His previous films include the coming-of-age short film “Jerome,” the satirical horror-comedy short “Saborrrr!” and the short film “Dead Flesh.” He has also written the feature script *Summer of Mercedes*, and received the 2024 best new filmmaker award from NewFilmmakers Los Angeles.

A proud father of two, he also knows some of the ins and outs of parenting detailed in “When Big People Lie.” We talked about film festival dynamics, surrendering innocence, and lying your way to the American dream.

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz Q&A on His Short Film ‘When Big People Lie’



Kaden Quinn in “When Big People Lie” by Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz, AFI

MovieMaker: How did you become a filmmaker?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: I was a pretty theatrical kid — taking lessons from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and Jim Carrey, sitting within an inch of my box TV set. If I wasn’t doing karate chops and striking Power Ranger poses, I was mimicking exaggerated faces. My grandmother swore my face was going to stay that way forever.

That was me — I thought, *I’m a comedy kid*. I took one acting class at 15 thinking it’d tie up all my career-path questions. But I never auditioned. I didn’t have that dog in me. So I wrote instead — not screenplays, but ratchety manuscripts, a proper novelist. And I didn’t have that dog in me for that either.

After x years in undergrad, I started thinking practically. The people I saw succeeding around me, the people I looked up to, they were all practical people. So I found myself in a colorful domestic life — wife, kids, a plan to work in education. Retirement! But divorce saved my life — it returned me to filmmaking. Everything I watched swirl down the porcelain bowl of tradition became my POV. That made me a filmmaker. Whether it’s a curse from a scorned lover or a calling from above, filmmaking got a hold on me — bad. Bad-bad.

MovieMaker: You’ve made several shorts in recent years. What did you want to explore and say with “When Big People Lie”? How did your life experience inform it?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: As a first-generation American, I experienced being American from a Non-American position. I experienced the performance of code-switching, watching my mother as a saleswoman. Children photograph experiences and they frame their worldview. What is that worldview? I don’t answer that, but I definitely think we begin formulating that question by the end of the short.

MovieMaker: You grew up in Boston — how did you find the film scene there?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: I grew up in Dorchester. I was there until I was about 19, and I loved movies. I think besides the kitchen table, one-on-one family time with my mom turned casual visits into sacrament. We went to the Loews Theater over in Dedham or the Regal in Fenway. That was my church until I found the ICA Boston (Institute of Contemporary Arts) and this dude Joe Douillette put a camera in my hand. He’s a madman for that. I think I still owe him 60 dollars for my dues.

I don’t feel like I’ve experienced Boston as a professional, but I want to. I’ve heard great things about shooting there, and I’ve seen great communities out there with Roxbury Film Festival, Boston Short Film Festival, and Boston Underground. I want to see more, and I hope to bring that with the features I’m working on now.

Until I get those on their feet, you’ll find me in Los Angeles because I have my cache of collaborators here – blame AFI.

MovieMaker: You recently got your MFA from AFI, one of the best film schools of all. What did you gain from film school? Is there anything you learned about filmmaking that you think can’t be taught in school?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: That whole first year I felt like I wasn’t sure what I was learning. You’re just going, going, going non-stop, and you’re kind of thinking, *I know all this, so why am I here?* But I think in the final rung of my second year I could see some developed approach to writing, directing, and working with actors that I didn’t feel like I had before.

It’s weird to say, but it’s hard to articulate what that is in a word. It’s like a cinematic sixth sense. I’m privileged to have graduated from that place, man. A couple of my features were developed under the direction of Barry Sabath. I feel really lucky to say that. I can’t imagine where I’d be without him or Rob Spera, or Andrew Wagner. I can hear their voices right now, I’m like, *alright, alright, I’ll keep writing at this thing.*

MovieMaker: “When Big People Lie” examines immigration from a pretty unique perspective — a Latina has citizenship, and a Middle Eastern man is seeking it. What did you want to say about immigration, especially in this time of ICE raids?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: There’s something here about immigrants using lies as tools. Lies are the scaffolding to the American Dream. That’s what Sasha Merci’s Lola and Faruk Amireh’s Mohammed corroborate together. It’s the very foundation of the American family, which by the way, don’t they play it with such subtlety? That’s casting, man, 80 percent of my job right there.

And not to make their work sound like some espionage thriller, but what country isn’t made up of lies? That’s the tragedy, because it’s not like a child doesn’t understand. They do. They always understand more than we give them credit for, they just don’t know how to say it like you or I. When your parents lie to belong somewhere they’re othered, you start to define yourself by those terms whether you realize it or not.

Politics are ugly because they forget the children. That’s how I feel about it. These inalienable rights we’re always pointing to always tend to alienate children. And you and I know from current events that it can get a lot worse. We know what that looks like today because of social media. Politics can’t hide the writing on the wall anymore.

MovieMaker: I really like that despite the title of “When Big People Lie,” the big turn comes when a little person has to lie. How did you arrive at that moment?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: You know, I credit a lot of that function to my co-writer Pablo Cervera. Sometimes, when you’re working in sort of an auteur-esque style you’re like *and then nothing happens, life goes on!* He really reined me in there. Let’s look at the three act structure. Let’s elevate what I want to say and how that happens. What is Elvis learning from his mother and how does he use that?

He brought that to this. A lot is riding on his lie, but it’s simple. It builds more and more tensely because we know that lies have painted murals of his long-absent father, because we know he’s been confused by the nature of Lola and Mohammed’s relationship from the outset. To understand those conventions as lies, that crushes him. All of a sudden he has this existential crisis. He’s eight!

But it’s this poetic thing of him becoming a big person even at eight. That’s how children of immigrants operate. Innocence is surrendered at such a young age, because it’s so easy to lie. It’s not really a child-like concept though. I don’t even believe it’s much of an adult concept either; it’s a fear-based instinct. We’re born with it.

That’s a mythic and biblical origin story right there. To lie is an integral part of the human condition. And why we lie, that’s an interesting question. That’s Adam and Eve. The fruit and the snake. The conditions we need to get us to lie answers what we fear.

MovieMaker: You’ve talked before with our friends at NewFilmakers Los Angeles about how some of your films have been embraced by Black-focused film festivals, and others by Latino-focused film festivals. How do you feel about festivals highlighting a particular demographic, and what do you see as potential benefits and drawbacks?

Gianfranco Fernández-Ruiz: I have a lot of thoughts about this. Look, I think it’s really important for filmmakers to have champions. Especially for filmmakers of color! It’s a tough gig, man, and an even harder time out there right now. So when you come to this industry and you’re uninitiated, your first stop in the festival circuit starts at what you look like. Places like ABFF (American Black Film Festival) or LALIFF (Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival) are great places for someone like me. The bridge is clear, the audience more welcoming. We’re seeing us, right?

But what if we tell a story that doesn’t look like us and send it to the same places? Will there be this hesitancy because I as a Black man wrote a Filipino character? I’ve seen work-phenomenal work-that I felt should have played and didn’t, and all I’m saying is that if the reason is that the story or characters aren’t Latin-focused or Asian-focused, I just think that’s a mistake, man. There’s a lot of competition, only so many programs, and too few programmers! Like I know that, but I also know that we need our champions. Organizations with specific ethnic or racial mandates, I see you.

And I get it, we’ve never had an entitled space of our own in this industry, so now you’re making it — I support it; it’s often in my own benefit. But let’s focus a little more on the author and the story, especially if the direction has teeth, if the acting is nuanced, if the lensing is sharp but tacit, and if the characters are specific and somehow, magically universal. Be our champions regardless of who we put on the screen. We are still the authors, and we need you.

Main image: “When Big People Lie.” AFI