

# Valedictorian

A film by Matthew Yeager

A Pendleton Pictures And  
Cowboy Bear Ninja Production



OFFICIAL SELECTION  
**INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL  
ROTTERDAM**  
2015



PRESS KIT

Writer & Director // Matthew Yeager

Producer // Javier Gonzalez

128 Guernsey St. 1L // Brooklyn, NY 11222 // USA

82 mins // 2015 // DCP

*Over the course of a year,  
Ben walks away from the life he'd built in New York.  
His friends and family piece together his departure  
as he dissolves into the background of the city.*



## Synopsis

*Valedictorian* is the study of a man, Ben, as he dissolves into the background of a city. Allowing Ben's journey to develop naturally over the course of a year, we catch glimpses of his life, prompting the question: how well do we really know those around us?

The year begins and nothing is going right for Ben. His car won't start. His girlfriend might as well be on another planet. His job is meaningless. He's out of sync with his band. He's too distracted to enjoy a pick-up game of basketball with a friend. Material possessions that once provided happiness for him are no longer important. Instead of trying to force the pieces together, he decides to walk away. With nowhere in mind, he drifts from the cold comfort of friends and family while falling into the fissures in his own mind.

Meanwhile, the people that knew him go on with their lives, peripherally observing Ben's growing departure from the "real world" through their own particular points-of-view, trying to reach him through their own limited means. No one is able to break through. His colleague and friend, Sandra, is hurt to witness Ben quit his job as he's been her only ally at work. His cousin Emily makes vague attempts at connecting to him through traded voicemails.

Following his immersion into the life of an outsider, Sandra remains hopeful about Ben's future, while she finds herself taking a page from his book, longing for an unburdened life. His friends think about Ben once in a while but assumed he's moved on like so many that pass through New York City. A drug dealer who knew Ben second-hand, sees him at a house occupied by drifters, but doesn't recognize him. Rona, who's been on her own and survived on the streets for years, gets to know the loner Ben has become and tries to figure out what's going through his mind.

All of these amorphous perspectives add up to a mosaic of Ben as someone who could not be easily pinned down. Now a memory to others, Ben has done away with who he was “supposed” to be and transformed himself into a wanderer, searching for the person he wants to be along the same streets he once knew.

A year has gone by, and Sandra comes across Ben in the same city that was once so familiar, now opening itself up to a life yet to be discovered.

## Director's Statement

In the early-2000s, I worked at a video store where I befriended a co-worker, Paul Nelson, a man well into his '60s. He died in 2006. The memorial service introduced those of us who knew Paul late in life to his friends and admirers from his earlier days. Paul, it turns out, was one of the founding forefathers of rock music criticism; having written for Rolling Stone, apologizing for Dylan when he went electric, chronicling an intervention that helped save Warren Zevon's life, publicizing David Bowie, signing the New York Dolls -- the list goes on. And then, a couple decades before I met him, he walked away from that life, much to the confusion of his friends, colleagues and family. They were mystified by Paul's vanishing from his successful life and many assumed it spoke to some deep inner turmoil or sickness of the mind. But we at the video store knew a Paul who was still creative, very inspired, and a good friend.

To reconcile willful disappearance and my experience with Paul, I wanted *Valedictorian* not to be a nightmare scenario of destitution nor a romanticized exercise in fantasy-fulfillment. I wanted to depict this outsider's journey as authentically and humanely as possible, by examining how someone's decision affects those that thought they knew him. Inspired by Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (one of Paul's favorite movies), I chose to bifurcate the movie into two parts; the first in which we witness a man making the decision to take a different path through life and then once he's begun to assimilate into his new environment, the second part sees him through the filter of his friends, family and acquaintances. In order to achieve this, we documented the character's arc over the course of a full year, shooting one scene each month.

This was a project that wouldn't work within the framework of a standard production schedule as it was my mission to capture Ben's denouement through the passing of the seasons, giving the story the necessary time to develop, writing each scene once the previous had been captured. I made a basic outline for the entire film and then scripted each month's shoot as it approached. The outline evolved organically over time based on what we'd achieved in the previous months, but we more or less followed the same rough character sketch that we began with in January.

With twelve different scenes set in different areas of the city that the main character would frequent, we found ourselves getting creative when working without a locations' budget or permits. For instance, we repurposed the same apartment four times as four different settings throughout the film. Each shoot felt almost like its own distinct short film as well as a continuous part of the whole picture. This was a direct reflection of my objective to capture the meaningful moments in Ben's life, the smaller parts of our existence that add up to a person's entire reality.



## About the Music

Music plays an integral role in the movie. Ben is a guitarist in an aspiring rock band, but would rather be playing to his own tune. Brian Dell, who portrays Ben, is a musician in real life and wrote the songs he performs in the movie and over the final credits. His band, Controller, is featured in one of the scenes, in their own rehearsal space, and were highlighted on [MTV's Buzzworthy](#). The film's composer, Daniel Rossen, knew the late Paul Nelson, and was similarly inspired by his story. There were many discussions about his own relationship to the idea of leaving it all behind. Now an accomplished singer-songwriter, having gained fame as a lead singer of the bands Grizzly Bear, Department of Eagles, and through his own solo career, Daniel connected with Ben's journey and even recorded some early versions of the music created for the film's soundtrack, which he is still developing.

"Matt and I met about 10 years ago, and we've talked now and again about working on a project together. *Valedictorian* was a pretty perfect match in a lot of ways. Often in my own writing I find myself thinking about landscape and setting more than anything else, so it felt natural that my given task in the film was to score the park scenes. It also wasn't hard for me to relate to the central character. In my early twenties I wasn't totally unlike Ben, and it was easy for me to recall my own version of what it felt like to drift and disappear in the city.

From the outset I had a good idea of Matt's aesthetic and approach, so I knew I could trust his direction. We had an easy time working together and getting on the same page. I like that a lot of Matt's favorite ideas were the sparsest and most minimal, and those generally ended up being my favorite moments as well." -- *Daniel Rossen*

## Director's Biography

Originally from Houston, Texas, Matthew Yeager is a writer, director, and producer currently based in Brooklyn. After attending NYU, he freelanced in all areas of production. He has directed music videos including Peter Squires' *Witch* and the Oklahoma Trio's *The Real Bin Wang* and shorts including *C'est Beau* and *The End of August*. He was Producer on the 2013 Fantastic Fest selection *Sulfuric*, and Associate Producer on Matt Porterfield's feature *I Used to be Darker* and John Gianvito's *Far From Afghanistan*. Recently, he edited *The Way The Crow Flies*. *Valedictorian* marks his feature film debut as Director and Screenwriter.

## Producer's Biography

Javier Gonzalez was Line Producer on the feature films *Bonne Annee* (Raindance Film Festival 2008), *Halley* (Sundance Film Festival 2013, Rotterdam Film Festival 2013), *3rd Street Blackout* starring Janeane Garofalo, and on the TV pilot *Proof of Concept: Lords of Magic* starring Theodora Wolley. He is an Associate Producer on the feature film *Sweet Little Lies* starring Bill Sage, and a Co-Producer on the feature film *Juvie* starring Jared Gilman and Eric Roberts. Javier is a Producer on the feature films *Valedictorian* (Rotterdam Film Festival 2015), *Summum Bonum* (East End Film Festival 2014, Los Cabos Film Festival 2014) and *Los Caprichos del Hombre* (Distrital Film Festival 2013). Javier acted as UPM on the feature film *Anomalous* starring Luis Homar and produced the short film *Hepburn* (New York Film Festival 2014). Javier wrote and produced the Off-Broadway play *Couch Surfing* at Access Theater in New York, N.Y. in November 2013. Javier was granted a Producer Residency by Dogfish Ventures from November 2014 to February 2015.

## Cast And Crew

### **Miguel Drake-McLaughlin // Director of Photography**

Most recently Miguel shot *The Diary Of Preston Plummer* (dir. Sean Ackerman starring Rumer Willis, Trevor Morgan, and Robert Loggia, 2012), and contributed to the filming of *Kingdom Come*, a Showtime documentary. His work behind the camera has also appeared on the PBS programs Art21 and Sesame Street. Miguel's first feature as Director of Photography was on *Sex Drugs Guns* (2009), which won Best Feature at the Philadelphia Independent Film Festival. Since founding the production company Cowboy Bear Ninja in 2011, Miguel has shot for director Marilyn Agrelo on her films *No Small Parts* (2013) and *The Untold Stories Of Motherhood* (2013). Miguel is currently working on *Sky Line*, a documentary he is directing about an elevator that goes to outer space.

### **Brian Dell // BEN**

Brian is a writer and musician raised in the hills outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Before moving to New York City, he studied literature at Lafayette College, booked punk shows, and lived in his car and on the couches of strangers. He makes music with Controller and runs SundayRoutine.com, a chronicle of the day off routines of interesting people. This is his first film role.

### **Jennifer Prediger // SANDRA**

Jennifer starred in *Uncle Kent* directed by Joe Swanberg (premiered at Sundance in 2011 and was purchased by IFC). She has gone to Sundance with *Foxy Merkins* in 2014 (dir. Madeleine Olnek) and *A Teacher* in 2013 (dir. Hanna Fidell), and has a co-starring role in the Gotham Award nominated comedy *Red Flag* (dir. Alex Karpovsky), released by Tribeca Film. Jennifer has leading roles in microbudget films *Richard's Wedding* (dir. Onur Tukel) and *Pollywogs* (dir. Karl Jacob with co-star Kate Lyn Shiel). *Trouble Dogs*, the feature she

co-directed, wrote and starred alongside her hilarious friend Jess Weixler also stars Megan Mullally, Will Forte and Jeffrey Tambor.

## Credits

### Key Crew

Writer, Director, Producer

MATTHEW YEAGER

Producer

JAVIER GONZALEZ

Director of Photography

MIGUEL DRAKE-McLAUGHLIN

Original Score

DANIEL ROSSEN

Production Design

MIKE DRURY

Costume Design

NORA BUSSOLARI

Sound Design

SASHA MANDEL

Art Director

GRACE HOLLAENDER

Editor

MATTHEW YEAGER

Associate Producers

ALEXANDRA SILADI

JUSTIN LEVY

### Cast

Ben

BRIAN DELL

Sandra

JENNIFER PREDIGER

Rona

ELEONORE HENDRICKS

Emily

HANNAH GROSS

Kay

TALLIE MEDEL

Beau

KERRY MALLOY

Steve

NED VAN ZANDT

Lou

SHANE JENSEN

Sebastian

CHRISTOPHER URBAN

Laura

RACHEL NAPOLEON

Julia

REMY BENNETT

Gigi

DAKOTA GOLDHOR

Flo

LAUREN MORROW

Andrew

DAVID McCULLOUGH

Girl at Party

NORA BUSSOLARI