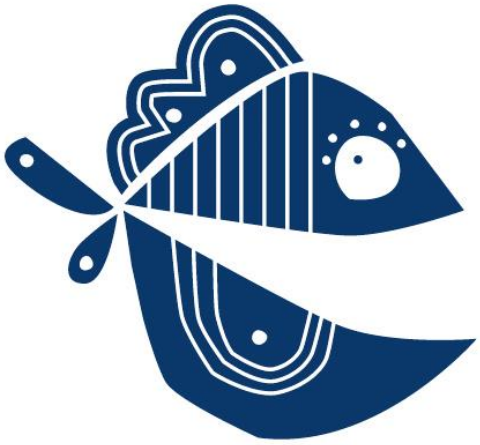


PSARO LOCO

MEDIA LITERACY PROJECT | LABS

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE



BURROS by Jefferson Stein

Executive Producer Eva Longoria

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GENERAL INFORMATION

Jefferson Stein is a writer-director from Texas based in Los Angeles. His short film *Tumble Dry Low* screened at Seattle, Maryland, and Tallinn Black Nights, was selected for the SHOOT New Directors Showcase, and garnered 2.5 million views on YouTube. His follow-up, *Burros*, was developed through Film Independent, produced by Spirit Award winner Liz Cardenas, and executive produced by Eva Longoria. The film premiered at Tribeca and screened at over 70 festivals, winning 19 awards. It qualified for the Academy Awards following a jury prize from Uma Thurman, Geena Davis, Matthew Modine, and Kyle MacLachlan. *Burros* was invited to screen at the Smithsonian Institution, the National Gallery of Art, and the United Nations. He is an Academy Nicholl Quarterfinalist and has directed commercial and branded documentary work for Vice, Adidas, and American Airlines.

TITLE

Burros (which in Spanish means "Donkeys")

COUNTRY

USA, 2021

GENRE

Drama / Short Film

THEMES

Childhood and Borders, Solidarity & Empathy, Indigenous Peoples & Cultural Heritage, Diversity & Inclusion, Language & Communication

DURATION

14 minutes and 28 seconds

LANGUAGE

O'odham, Spanish, and English (with available subtitles and closed captions - CC in English, Greek, Spanish, French, and Italian)

AUDIENCE / RECOMMENDED AGES

For students aged 12 and over (Middle School / High School)

PREMIERE

Tribeca Film Festival 2021

CREW

DIRECTOR & WRITER: Jefferson Stein

PRODUCER: Liz Cardenas

PRODUCERS: Russell Sheaffer, Jefferson Stein, Douglas Riggs

CO-PRODUCERS: Corey Howard, R. Brett Thomas

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Eva Longoria, Sandra Condito, Larry 'Bear' Wilson, Camillus Lopez

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: Cole Graham

PRODUCTION DESIGNER: Spencer Clayton

EDITOR: R. Brett Thomas

COSTUME DESIGNER: Robin A. Strand

MUSIC: Amanda Jones

MUSIC SUPERVISOR: Carly Van Skaik

CAST: Amaya Juan (Elsa), Zuemmy Carrillo (Ena), Virginia Patricio (Grandma / Gagi)

PRODUCTION COMPANIES: UnbeliEVAble Entertainment, Ten to the Six Pictures, Artless Media

In cooperation with Film Independent

Synopsis

Elsa, a young indigenous girl, lives with her father in a trailer in the desert of the Tohono O'odham Nation, twenty miles away from the US-Mexico border. One morning, while her father leaves for a border patrol support shift, he asks her to stay put. Chasing a ball, she wanders off and discovers Ena, a Latin American migrant girl her own age hidden in the shade, who has been separated from her father in the desert. Even though they do not speak the same language, Elsa realizes she has found a friend. Together, they embark on a journey through the community in search of the only person who speaks all languages: Elsa's grandmother.

Trailer



LINK: https://vimeo.com/758146458?fl=pl&fe=ti

FILM ANALYSIS

Film Context

Jefferson Stein's film "**BURROS**" takes us to the heart of the **Tohono O'odham Nation desert in Arizona**, twenty miles away from the US-Mexico border. Through the story of six-year-old Elsa, an indigenous girl who discovers a Latin American migrant girl her own age (Ena) lost and separated from her father, the film offers a rare and **sensitive perspective on the issue of migration and border security**.

The work focuses on a community whose ancestral lands are cut in half by a border that the residents themselves never created. Rather than focusing exclusively on major political and geopolitical issues, the director chooses to tell the story through the eyes of two children who do not even share a common language (speaking O'odham, Spanish, and English). The director raises crucial questions that are directly linked to the values of active citizenship and rights:

Through this unusual encounter, the film raises crucial questions:

- *How does a community live with the daily consequences of an artificial border?*
- *What is the moral and human cost of helping someone in need in the desert, and what is the cost of indifference?*
- *What does a child see—and fail to understand—in a world shaped by adults?*

Shot in just four days on Super 16mm film and in close collaboration with the local Tohono O'odham community—featuring non-professional actors from the area—**the film serves simultaneously as an ethnographic record and a hymn to childhood innocence, solidarity, and the search for human connection beyond borders and language barriers.**

Expressive Means

Jefferson Stein's cinematic language in "BURROS" is based on a series of conscious aesthetic and technical choices that enhance the emotion, authenticity, and dramaturgical tension of the story.

Super 16mm Film & Anamorphic Lenses

- **The Film Texture:** The film was shot on genuine Super 16mm film (Arriflex 416 Plus) with Kodak Vision3 (50D, 250D, 500T). The organic, grainy texture (grain) of the film imparts a sense of immediacy, realism, and earthy warmth.
- **Cinematography & Landscape:** Using Hawk V-Lite16 anamorphic lenses in a 2.35:1 aspect ratio, Director of Photography Cole Graham captures the striking expansive feel of the Sonoran Desert. The landscape of the ancestral lands does not merely function as a backdrop, but as an autonomous, living character that combines natural beauty with danger.

2. **Perspective & Camera Height**

- **The Children's Gaze:** The camera is positioned steadily at the eye level of the two six-year-old girls (Elsa and Ena). The viewer experiences the world through their perception, observing what they see as well as what they cannot yet comprehend from the adult world.
- **Natural Lighting & Shadows:** The contrast between the relentless, scorching desert light and the shadows of bushes or buildings underscores the struggle for survival and the search for shelter.

3. **Language, Silence, and Soundscapes**

- **Trilingualism:** The film uses three different languages (O'odham, Spanish, English). The lack of a common language between the two girls shifts the weight of the narrative from verbal communication to non-verbal communication (gazes, gestures, sharing water and play).
- **Natural Sounds of the Desert:** The soundtrack is enriched with the natural sounds of the wind, footsteps on the sand, and the children's breathing, heightening the sense of isolation and solidarity.

Recognition

The film was screened at a total of 76 international festivals across six continents and won 20 awards, while also receiving nominations and consideration at top film awards.

- **Tribeca Film Festival**, World Premiere (June 2021)
- **Oscar-qualifying**, Live Action Short, 95th Academy Awards (Jury Award, New York International Children's Film Festival)
- **Psaroloco International Children and Young People's Film Festival**
- **The Hollywood Reporter**: Top 15 Contender for Oscars, Live Action Short (2022)
- **Jury Award**, Live Action Short: New York International Children's Film Festival
- **Shorts Spotlight**, Best of Show: SCAD Savannah Film Festival
- **Jury Award**, Best Narrative Short: Sidewalk Film Festival
- **Audience Choice**, Best Narrative Short: Santa Fe Independent Film Festival
- **Jury Award**, Best Dramatic Short: Arizona International Film Festival
- **Best Live Action Short Film**: RNCI Red Nation Awards
- **Jury Award**, Best Short Film: Nòt Film Fest, Italy
- **Outstanding Ensemble Cast**: Tallgrass Film Festival
- **Jury Award**, Best Narrative Short: Anchorage International Film Festival
- **Jury Award**, Best Narrative Short: Albuquerque Film & Music Experience
- **Jury Commendation**, Best Writing for a Short: Port Townsend Film Festival
- **Official Competition**: Busan International Short Film Festival (the only American film selected out of 2,548 entries) and Short Shorts Film Festival & Asia (both Oscar-qualifying)
- **Special Screenings**: Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; Mother Tongue Film Festival at the Smithsonian

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

Teaching Objective: In this activity, students will explore the theme of the film and learn to critically analyze the characters and the film's narrative.

- What are your initial impressions of the film?
- How long does the story last in "real" time, and how does time pass through the eyes of the two girls?
- How did the director manage to capture your interest from the beginning without a common language of communication between the female protagonists?
- How would the story change if the events happened in a different order or if the children's meeting took place at a different point in the desert?
- How did you feel about the ending of the film and the journey toward the grandmother?
- Is there a character you remember vividly (Elsa, Ena, the father, the grandmother)? Is there a main character? Is the story really about that character or about the entire community?
- How does the Tohono O'odham desert landscape affect the characters and the way they behave?
- Look at and discuss the film's poster and stills with the entire class. Why were these elements chosen for its promotion?

Teaching Objective: Students will learn to analyze the film through its symbolism.

- The desert and the border play a significant role in the film. We ask students to think of scenes from the film where the natural landscape or the border determines the actions of the characters.
- We discuss: what does the presence of the border and the lack of a common language show us?
- We ask students to describe the elements of a scene (the desert light, the heat, the silence) as well as the feelings they experienced while watching it.
- During the discussion about the film, we identify **symbolic meanings**: the border as an artificial separation, the desert as a trial, water and food as acts of solidarity, and friendship as a bridge.
- **Creative Writing Exercise:** Choose one of the characters in the film and imagine what they might write in a diary at the end of this day.

ACTIVITY I

THE HERO'S JOURNEY AND THE DESERT ADVENTURE

Teaching Objective: In this activity, students will learn that the concept of the "journey" and the quest constitutes a universal narrative core (the hero's journey / monomyth), examining how the two young protagonists of the film are transformed into heroines of a difficult path.

Discussion on the concept of the "Hero"

- We ask the students: What makes someone a "hero" in stories, myths, or cinematic works? Do they necessarily have to possess superpowers, or can it be a child facing a difficult reality?
- We discuss the concept of the journey not just as a geographical movement, but as an inner path of coming of age, finding a friend, and overcoming obstacles.

Connecting the girls' story to the stages of the journey

Based on the core stages of the narrative arc (**Departure – Initiation/Trial – Return**), we examine the plot of the film *Burros*:

- **Departure (Status Quo & Call to Adventure):**

  Elsa wanders away from the trailer chasing a ball and encounters Ena, who is lost in the desert. The children suddenly find themselves facing a critical situation.

- **Initiation / Trials (The Abyss & Challenges):**

  The girls embark together on a journey through the dangerous desert of the Tohono O'odham tribe. Despite the language barrier, they cooperate to find the person who will help them.

- **Return / Transformation (Return & Elixir):**

  The journey to the grandmother serves as the pivotal step that unites the community and provides a solution, leaving the children transformed and wiser through the experience of solidarity.

Group Classroom Activity

- We divide the students into groups and ask them to map out the "journey" of Elsa and Ena as an adventure map.

- Each group records the "obstacles" (the desert, the borders, the lack of a shared language) as well as the "gifts" or "tools" at their disposal (friendship, empathy, community support).

ACTIVITY II

LANGUAGE, SILENCE, AND HUMAN RIGHTS BEYOND BORDERS

Educational Objective: In this activity, students will explore the role of language and communication in the film, understand the difference between verbal and non-verbal means of expression, and discuss the rights of children and migrants.

Language as a Bridge and as a Barrier

- **Class discussion:** In the film, Elsa speaks the O'odham language and a little English, Ena speaks Spanish, while the grandmother is the one who knows all the languages. How do the two girls manage to communicate in critical moments without a shared vocabulary?
- Analyze how gazes, gestures, offering water, and walking together function as a "universal language" of solidarity and empathy.

Borders and Children's Rights

- Context Analysis: The film takes us to the region of the Tohono O'odham tribe, where borders divide communities and families.
- We ask the students: What happens when a child finds themselves alone and lost in a dangerous desert? What are the fundamental rights of every child (such as the right to protection, safety, and care), regardless of where they were born or what language they speak?

Group Exercise: "Our Own Language"

- We divide the students into groups. We ask them to imagine being in a place where no one speaks their language.
- Each group is asked to create a three-point "communication code" (without using any words or speech at all) in order to solve a shared problem (e.g., how to guide someone to a safe place or how to show trust).
- At the end, the groups present their code and discuss how they felt.

ACTIVITY III

CREATIVE WORKSHOP: YOUR OWN SHORT STORY OF SILENCE AND FRIENDSHIP

Educational Objective: In this activity, students will apply their knowledge of cinematic media and harness their creativity by creating their own audiovisual scene lasting up to 2 minutes.

The Power of the Single Shot and Wordless Communication

- We discuss in class how the lack of a shared language in the film *Burros* enhanced the emotional connection between the two girls.
- We examine how the camera can tell an entire story without the use of dialogue, relying solely on action, gazes, camera angles, the natural environment, and ambient sounds.

Instructions for Creating Your Own Video

- **Production Groups:** We divide the students into small groups. Using a mobile phone, tablet, or camera, each group is asked to create a single shot (or a short continuous sequence shot without cuts) with a maximum duration of 2 minutes.
- **Thematic Focus:** The video's story should revolve around a moment of encounter, solidarity, or overcoming an obstacle between two people who do not know each other or do not speak the same language (inspired by the central theme of the film).

In-Class Presentation and Assessment

- The groups screen/project their videos in class.
- Discussion:

  - How did they manage space and time?
  - What was the role of silence and natural sounds?
  - How did they feel creating a story based on empathy and cooperation?

SOURCES – FURTHER READING:

Official Film Website: burrosthefilm.com – Stills, press kit, interviews with the cast and crew, and information on festival screenings.

Tribeca Film Festival: tribecafilm.com

Director Interviews:

- *Moveable Fest Interview (2021):* «Jefferson Stein on Looking for the Silver Linings in Burros» – **Analysis of the children's perspective and collaboration with the community.**
- *Film Business Spotlight (2022):* «Director Spotlight: Jefferson Stein on BURROS» – – Explanation of the title's multi-layered symbolism and the production process.

Social & Cultural Context (Tohono O'odham & Borders)

- **Tohono O'odham Nation (Official Website):** tonation-nsn.gov – History, language, culture, and the geographical reality of the indigenous community on both sides of the US–Mexico border.
- **Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian:** americanindian.si.edu – Educational resources and exhibitions on the indigenous peoples of the Americas.
-
- **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII):**un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples – Reports on the rights of indigenous peoples and the impacts of international borders on ancestral lands.

Educational & Humanitarian Frameworks

- **ActionAid – Global Citizens Initiative:** Resources and guides on global citizenship, solidarity, combating discrimination, and the rights of migrants/refugees.
- **UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**: unhcr.org **– Educational resources for understanding forced population displacement and the rights of child migrants.**
- **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF)**: unicef.org – **The legal and ethical framework for the protection of children regardless of nationality or linguistic origin.**

Film Literacy & Audiovisual Reflection

- **Psaroloco Media Literacy Project:** psaroloco.org – Film analysis methodology for children and youth, media literacy guides, and educational kits.
- **Media Education Foundation:** mediaed.org – Resources and studies on critical media analysis and visual literacy in education.

This educational kit is published as part of the free educational resources of the **Psaroloco Media Literacy Project**.

The recommended age group is **12+**. You should watch the film and the related clips prior to delivering the classroom activities to ensure that the content is suitable for your students.

Search for the film on the Psaroloco website under the category **Watch the films**.

EDITED BY: Soultana Koumoutsi

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Have comments?

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