

# AMERICAN UNDERDOG

RISE. FIGHT. REDEEM.



**HOW MANY PUNCHES ARE YOU WILLING TO TAKE?**

Independent SPORTS DRAMA Feature Film set in the world of MMA

Filmed in Chicago, IL and Los Angeles, CA

Runtime: 1 hour 29 minutes 25 seconds

Shot using the Arra-Alexi Mini Camera with 2.39 aspect ratio

Audio Format 5.1 Surround

Languages: English, Tamil

A Peach Partners Production / Mulberry Films / Fabled Frame Production

in Association With MxW Ventures and Dee Entertainment

Original Story by Vishy Ayyar

Screenplay by Gustavo Martin and Matt Miscia

Directed by Gustavo Martin Benites



## LOGLINE

A man with a troubled past has a chance at redemption by entering a local MMA tournament.

## PLOT SUMMARY

American Underdog is the story of an Indian-American immigrant and amateur MMA fighter, fresh out of jail; a Prodigal Son who must redeem and rebuild his life to become a better man. During an unexpected encounter in a convenience store our protagonist steps in to stop a robbery, and finds himself suddenly and uncomfortably in the limelight hailed as a local hero. He is entered into a local MMA tournament, and in order to win, he must look deep within to overcome his past transgressions in order to find redemption and move forward.



**SALES** Contact:

**PRESS** Contact:

# THE FILMAKERS | DIRECTOR / WRITER

## GUSTAVO MARTIN BENITES



Gustavo is an award winning Peruvian American director based in Chicago, IL. With over a dozen short films under his belt as Director, his work has been screened at film festivals around the world and featured on the popular short film website Filmshortage.com. His quirky documentary *Fupa*, screened in film festivals around the country, including; Boston Underground Film Festival 2020, Atlanta Underground Film Festival 2021, and Midwest Weirdfest 2021 - where it was awarded "Best Documentary Short"

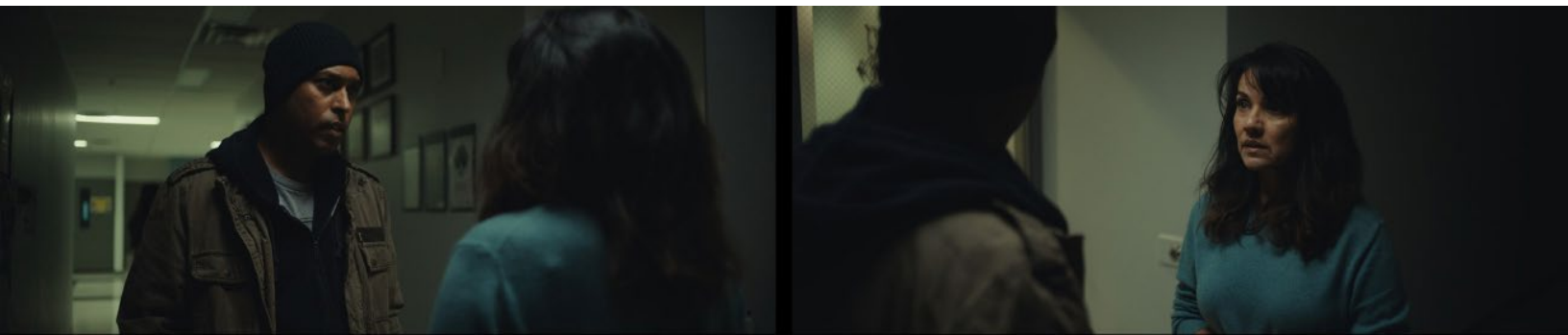
Gustavo has been on set with talent such as Ron Perlman (*Hellboy*, *Sons of Anarchy*), Ali Larter (*Final Destination*, *Resident Evil*), Milo Ventimiglia (*Heroes*), John Billingsley (*Star Trek: Enterprise*), and Jennifer Hudson (*Dreamgirls*). He has had the good fortune of working with and learning from such talented directors, such as

Emmy Award winning commercial director Lance Acord, and Steve Macqueen (*12 Years a Slave*). Gustavo is also a student of Cannes Film Festival Alum, Melina León (*Song without a Name*, Director's Fortnight at Cannes). Under Melina's mentorship, Gustavo's short script *Breathe*, went on to be selected as finalist - among the top 8 - at Scriptapalooza 2021.

*AMERICAN UNDERDOG* is Gustavo's first feature length film.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*American Underdog* is the story of an Indian-American immigrant and amateur MMA fighter, fresh out of jail; a Prodigal Son who must redeem and rebuild his life to become a better man. During an unexpected encounter in a convenience store our protagonist steps in to stop a robbery, and finds himself suddenly in the limelight hailed as a local hero—something very much at odds with his internal dialogue. He is entered into a MMA tournament, and in training he is forced to examine why he's hiding from his life, his past and even his future. Our hero takes an introspective journey grappling with vulnerability, regret, shame ultimately seeking forgiveness, redemption, and a new sense of courage. Almost every character in the film is flawed, and seeks or has achieved redemption in their own broken lives. It is a universal human story – to struggle with internal demons and through catharsis, sacrifice, determination, and grit become our best realized selves. We are all American Underdogs, and in our darkest, most vulnerable moments we must rise and find our strength, our light to become victorious.



# THE FILMAKERS | PRODUCERS

## CRISTY COORS BEASLEY Fabled Frames



Cristy is a producer, writer and talent manager based in Los Angeles. Cristy founded the boutique talent management firm S+C Management in 2010, which represents a select list of global actors across all media.

Her production LONELYGIRL15, is considered the first internet episodic production phenomenon, and was hailed by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential events of the decade. Cristy also produced the follow-up internet episodic KATEMODERN for the BEBO streaming platform, casting the yet unknown actors Jamie Bell (BILLY ELLIOT) and Ralf Little (DEATH IN PARADISE, 24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE).

In 2012, Cristy moved into narrative feature films, working alongside director/writer Antonia Bogdanovitch to produce MY LEFT HAND MAN, for which she won Best Producer in the Madrid International Film Festival. Other notable productions include the experimental arthouse film THE WOUND by writer/director duo Ed and Jack McWilliams; a documentary on the world famous Maverick Championship surfers of Santa Cruz, CA THE WESTSIDERS, directed by Josh Pomer, which earned nominations around the world from Santa Barbara to Hawaii, to Australia. Cristy helped restore Dennis Hopper's only directorial effort, OUT OF THE BLUE, which is currently playing on the global festival circuit in Paris, SXSW, NY, LA and many others. Most recently she produced the coming-of-age wartime drama THE COLLABORATOR, based on the novel by Mirza Waheed, and stars UK's Rudi Dharmalingam and newcomer Nikhil Rai Singh, which is currently in post production.

Cristy is a proud and active member of The British Academy of Film and Television Los Angeles, The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, and is on the National Alumnae Board of The Hutchison School.



## **RASHAANA SHAH** Mulberry Films



Rashaana Shah is a producer with Mulberry Films, a TV and film development company specializing in books to films adaptations.

Born in India, Ms. Shah earned a degree in computer engineering from a prominent Indian university before moving to Mumbai to pursue a career in acting. Between 2005 and 2012, Ms. Shah starred in multiple Bollywood and International films that have won international awards, including COLOURS OF PASSION by renowned director Ketan Mehta, and the IFC TV miniseries BOLLYWOOD HERO by comedian Chris Kattan.

Primarily a producer since 2012, Rashaana produced films and music videos featuring ethnically diverse casts from around the globe, including Georgia, UK, Kenya, USA, South Korea and India. Her feature films BLOWING UP RIGHT NOW and A NEW CHRISTMAS, are both available on Amazon. Most recently she produced the coming-of-age wartime drama THE COLLABORATOR, based on the prize winning book by Mirza Waheed, starring UK's Rudi Dharmalingham and newcomer Nikhil Singh Rai. The film is currently in post-production and set for completion in early 2024. She also executive produced LOST AND FOUND IN CLEVELAND, currently on the festival circuit, with an ensemble cast that includes Martin Sheen, Lisa Weil, June Squibb, Dennis Haysbert, Jon Lovitz and Loretta Devine.

Rashaana has a slate of TV and film projects based on award-winning books in development, including THE PIANO TUNER, PURPLE AMERICA and NANDA DEVI.



## **NAVEEN CHATHAPPURAM** Peach Partners Productions



Naveen is the founder and President of Immortal Thoughts, a Chicago-based production company, which currently has over a dozen projects in various stages of development. As a producer, Naveen has worked alongside a diverse set of directors and many industry talents - such as Director/DP John R. Leonetti (ANNABELLE, THE CONJURING, INSIDIOUS), Producer/UPM Billy Higgins (HIGH FIDELITY, ALI, SOURCE CODE), Editor Mark Conte (TURNER & HOOC, THE SIXTH DAY, PERSON OF INTEREST), and Finance Head Reliance Mediaworks Global Devarajan ("Dev") Venkat – learning from each of them. Among the many

talented collaborators though, he would always consider Director Stephen Milburn Anderson (himself a protege of reckoned filmmaker Oliver Stone), to be his mentor.

Naveen's passion for powerful storytelling is recognized in his work, producing such films as CASH, written undirected by Stephen Milburn Anderson (SOUTH CENTRAL, HEARTS OF STONE), starring Sean Bean (GAME OF THRONES, LORD OF THE RINGS, RONIN) and introduced Chris Hemsworth (THOR, AVENGERS, RUSH). Other recent projects produced by Naveen include the animated film NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD: ORIGINS in association with Simon West (TOMB RAIDER, CON AIR, THE GENERAL'S DAUGHTER, MECHANIC); BROWN NATION, a sitcom which released worldwide on Netflix. Most recently, Naveen both produced and directed the Neo-western thriller THE LAST VICTIM starring Ron Pearlman, Ali Larter, and Ralph Ineson.

Naveen studied Cinema Arts and Science at Columbia College Chicago. He is represented by Morris Yorn Barnes Levine and Krintzman.



# THE CAST

**DANNY TREJO** in the role of "DENNIS"



Danny Trejo has developed a prolific career in the entertainment industry with a hard earned and atypical road to success. From years of imprisonment to helping troubled youth battle drug addictions, from acting to producing, and now on to restaurant ventures, Trejo's name, face, and achievements are well recognized in Hollywood and beyond, but it is his continuous role as a devoted father of three and an intervention counselor that bring him the most satisfaction. Trejo has starred in dozens of films including DESPERADO, HEAT, the FROM DUSK TIL DAWN series, CON AIR, ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO, SPY KIDS, MACHETE, and MACHETE KILLS.

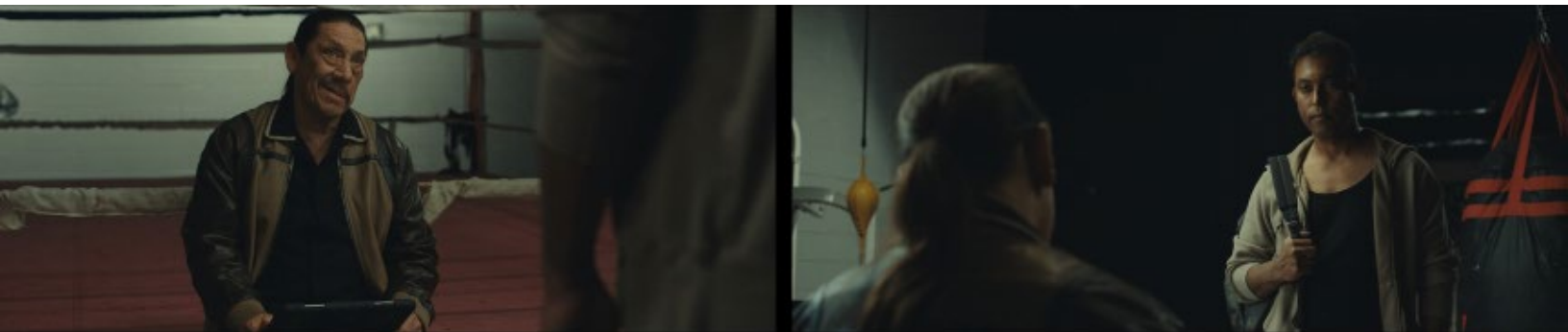
On the television side, Trejo had recurring roles on SONS OF ANARCHY, KING OF THE HILL, BREAKING BAD, and THE FLASH, among others.

In the 3rd season of AMERICAN GODS, Danny played the character of "Mr. World." Most recently, he can be seen in the role of Rancor Keeper in THE BOOK OF BOBA FETT airing on Disney+.

Trejo has starred in and voiced various popular video games like CALL OF DUTY, FALLOUT, GRAND THEFT AUTO, and DEF JAM. Additionally, Danny has voiced characters in the animated films STORKS, THE BOOK OF LIFE, MAYA AND THE THREE directed by Jorge R. Gutierrez, and Universal Pictures' MINIONS 2: The Rise of Gru, released Summer 2022. Danny's colorful life and prolific career are chronicled in the bio-documentary INMATE #1 released in 2020. Trejo also released his fearlessly honest memoir TREJO: MY LIFE OF CRIME, REDEMPTION, AND HOLLYWOOD in July 2021.

Trejo's expanding restaurant empire includes Trejo's Tacos & Cantina, and Trejo's Coffee & donuts, with a fifth restaurant opening in downtown Los Angeles in March. His entrance to the literary world was sharing his love of food in the release of his first cookbook TREJO'S TACOS: RECIPES and STORIES from LA. His companion book, TREJO'S CANTINA, a book about cocktails, snacks & amazing non-alcoholic drinks from the heart of Hollywood, will be released in April 2023.

Danny Trejo is represented by Gloria Hinojosa of Amsel, Eisenstadt, Frazier & Hinojosa, Inc.



After years of training fighters in the sport, Dennis lost his appetite for MMA and decided to pursue a career teaching instead. Dennis receives a surprise visit from Jai Kumar, who he used to train. When Jai ask Dennis for help training for an upcoming fight, Dennis is doubtful at first, but eventually decides to help Jai train.

## VERÓNICA FALCÓN in the role of "MARCELLA"

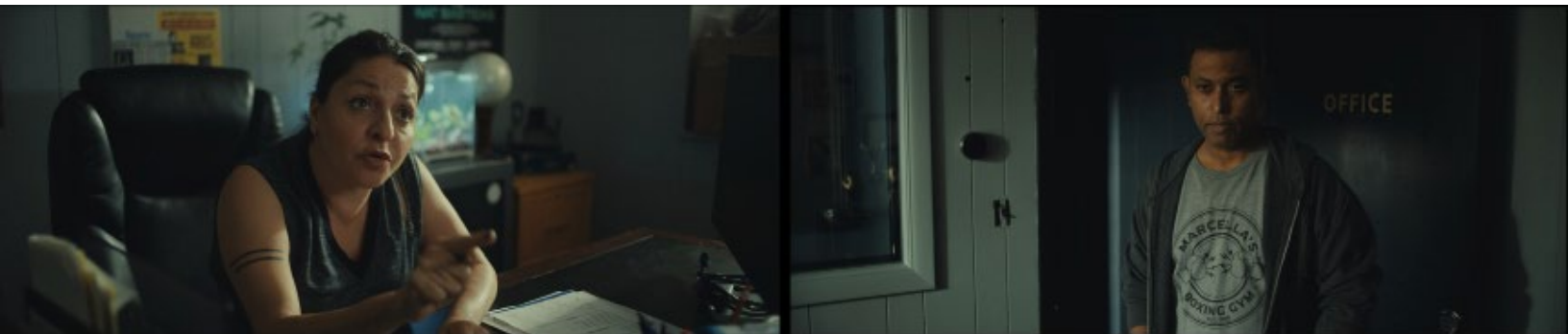


Verónica Falcón is considered one of Mexico's most prestigious actors. In 2015 she emigrated to the US, within months she was cast as one of the leads in the hit television series QUEEN OF THE SOUTH, her character "Camila Vargas" quickly became a fan favorite. her filmography includes many prestige television credits in series such as OZARK opposite Laura Linney, Jason Bateman and Julia Garner. In HBO'S PERRY MASON she played another fan favorite, "Lupe Gibbs" opposite Matthew Rhys; in Steven Conrad's critically acclaimed PERPETUAL GRACE LTD, she played opposite Sir Ben Kingsley, Luis Guzman & Jackie Weaver.

Some of her latest film credits include Disney's JUNGLE CRUISE where she acted next to Dwayne Johnson, Emily Blunt and Jack Whitehall. A MILLION MILES AWAY with Michael Pena and Julia Cedilla; VOYAGERS opposite Collin Ferrell; THE FOREVER PURGE; and Ted Melfi's THE STARLING. In television, her work can be seen in Marc Cherry's WHY

WOMEN KILL, HBO'S ROOM 104 directed by Mark Duplass; Marvel's THE FALON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER; and Joseph Gordon Levitt's MR. CORMAN, amongst other shows.

In the Latin market, her breakthrough performance in the film DAYS OF GRACE won critical acclaim. Directed by Everardo Gout, the movie is considered one of the most important Mexican films of that decade and won seven Mexican Academy Awards. Other credits include A MONSTER OF A THOUSAND HEADS directed by the award winning director Rodrigo Pal; the cult film HASTA EL VIENTO TIENE MIEDO; MIDAQ'S ALLEY, SAVING PRIVATE PEREZ, and many more. Ms. Falcón was nominated by the Mexican Film Critics Association as Best Supporting Actor for the film SUGAR KISSES. The film was directed by Oscar Nominee Carlos Cuarón. Some of her LATAM television credits include HBO'S SR. AVILA; CAPADOCIA; EL SENOR DE LOS CIELOS; TRECE MIEDOS; LOS MINONDO; EL CAPITAN CAMACHO and Eugenio Derbez's LA ALEGRIA DEL HOGAR.



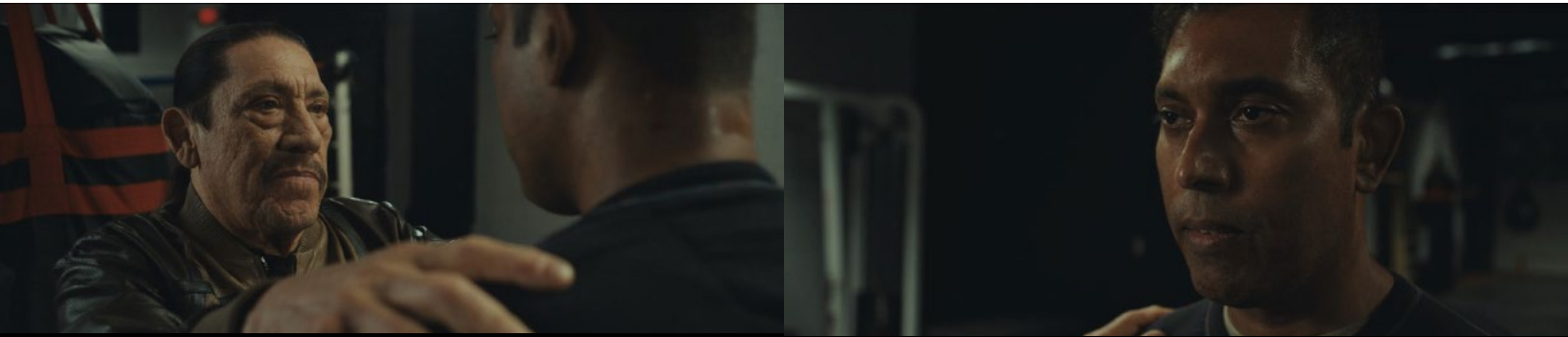
Marcella is the proud owner of Marcella's Gym, a humble, gritty local training ground. When Marcella discovers that the janitor Jai is a fighter, she pushes him out of his comfort zone into the spotlight by entering against a fierce opponent in her annual MMA Tournament.



**VISHY AYYAR** in the role of "JAI KUMAR"



Vish is a writer, actor and producer, and dedicated amateur MMA fighter and aficionado. He conceptualized and developed the story AMERICAN UNDERDOG, based loosely on his own life and experiences as an immigrant. Vish began his acting career as a child on stage from the age of five, and has extensive theater background and training including French theater. He holds graduate degrees in Information Systems and Business, with undergraduate degrees in Biology and Chemistry. Vish is also a best selling author, motivational speaker and coach, and fluent in 5 languages including English, French, and Tamil.



Newly out of prison and lacking purpose, Jai takes a job at the local MMA training facility Marcella's Gym as the janitor. During a chance encounter at a local convenience store during an otherwise routine day, Jai stops a robbery and takes down the culprit, a down and out MMA fighter Marcus Kahil. The whole thing is caught on camera, and goes viral, pegging Jai as a reluctant local hero. Gym owner Marcella sees a chance to get the gym tournament in the limelight by entering Jai in fight, capitalizing on his newfound fame. Jai is compelled to fight while wrestling his own demons, reinventing his life, and trying to prove himself and find redemption in the eyes of his family, his community and ultimately himself.

## ANDREW GRAY in the role of "MARCUS"



Andrew is an established actor and model best known for his role of "Troy Burrows" aka "The Red Ranger" in the wildly popular POWER RANGERS MEGAFORCE, which he played for nearly a decade. Other television series he has appeared include DIRTY TALK, BETRAYED, and MY MORPHING LIFE. Andrew also starred alongside the ensemble cast Kelly Mi Li, Anna Shay, Kevin Kreider, Kane Lim and Kim Lee in the highly watched American reality series BLING EMPIRE for Netflix.

As a model, Andrew has appeared in international campaigns for ZARA, DIOR, TANGERAY, SONY, HOLLISTER, VANITY FAIR and other brands.

He is also an advocate for mental health awareness and youth self empowerment. He talks regularly about these issues on his podcast MY HAPPINESS and his YouTube series SUPERHERO YOU.

Andrew is also an avid fitness and health enthusiast, with years of training in boxing and MMA. In July, Andrew had his first professional fight in Los Vegas entering the ring against the well known rapper Bluetooth.



Once a promising MMA up and comer, Marcus' troublesome behavior got him booted from the sport. After viral footage of an attempted robbery shows Marcus bested by local gym janitor Jai Kumar, he sets out to regain his good standing by defeating Jai in the ring

## **TAYLOR TREADWELL** in the role of "MELISSA"



Taylor Treadwell's notable feature work includes *KNIGHT & DAY* opposite Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz, directed by James Mangold; *HALL PASS* directed by Peter and Bobby Farrelly; *W.* directed by Oliver Stone; as well as *THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA* directed by David Frankel. Taylor plays a hilarious turn as the Bostonian girlfriend in the comedy feature film *FATHER FIGURES* opposite Ed Helm and Owen Wilson, directed by Lawrence Sher for Warner Bros. and Alcon Entertainment; She is in the Fred Roos produced film *PRETTYFACE* directed by Jessica Janos, in which she portrays Gypsy, who in the 1970's was a close companion of Charles Manson. Taylor more recently appears in *HOLLYWOOD DIRT* directed by Tosca Musk for the new streaming service PASSIONFLIX, as well as the indy feature *EVEN AFTER EVERYTHING* directed by Josh Crook. She most recently wrapped a cameo in the indy film *THE GIFT* playing a celebrity talent judge opposite the ensemble stars Eugenia Yuan, Ludi Lin, Joley Fisher and Archie Kao.

In television, Taylor was honored to play the recurring Role on HBO'S *BIG LITTLE LIES* Season 2, portraying the "Young Mary Louise Wright" (Meryl Streep). She portrays nurse "Delicia" on *IRON FIST* for Marvel/Netflix/ABC; and "Josie" on Showtime's hit *RAY DONOVAN* opposite Jon Voight, directed by Liev Schreiber. Other television credits include recurring Guest Star role on The CW's *THE VAMPIRE DIARIES*, a Recurring Reporter on ABC's *SCANDAL*, and a hilarious Guest Star on FX's *IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN PHILADELPHIA*.

On Stage, Taylor received critical praise and was nominated for Best Actress for her leading lady performance in New York's Hudson Theater in *THE GIRLFRIEND EXPERIENCE*. She was again nominated for her performance in Los Angeles in the world premiere of the dramedy *SWEET NOTHINGS* in the lead of "Christina".

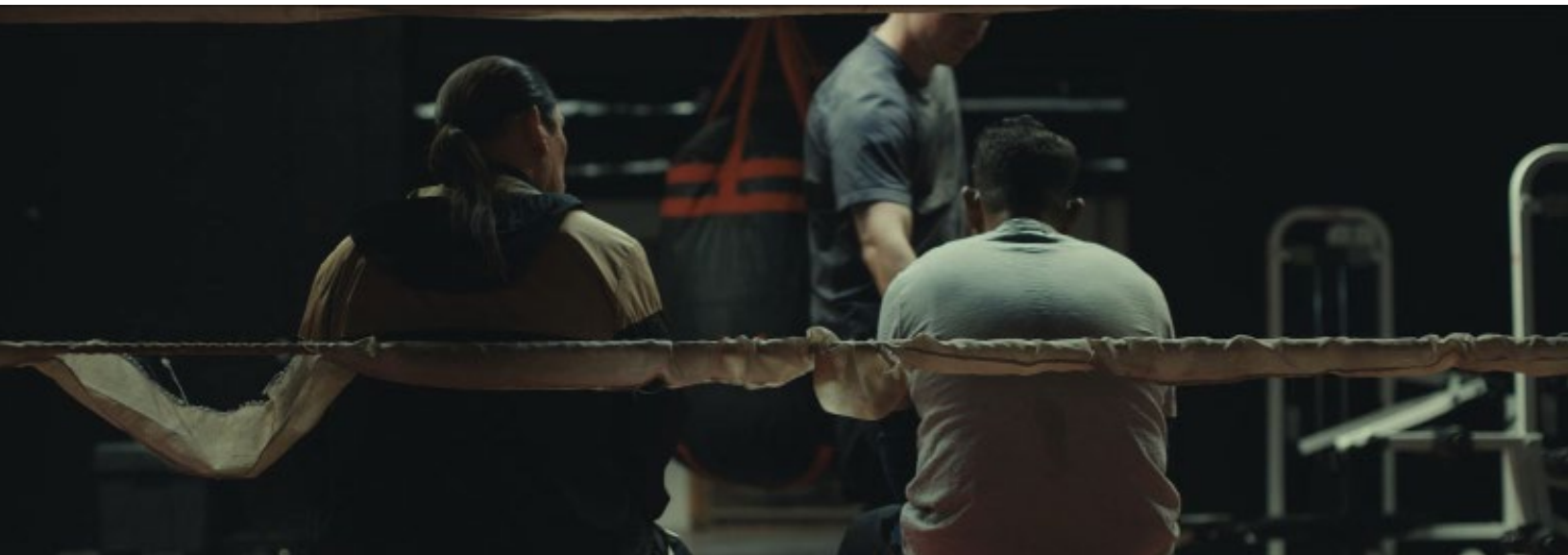
Taylor studied acting at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and continued her studies in Los Angeles, graduating legendary acting coach Stephen Book's 4-Year Intensive Course. She continues to train and perform improv as well, performing with The Upright Citizens Brigade and The IO-West, amongst other outlets.



After a series of personal setbacks, Melissa is determined to put her rough past behind her and regain custody of her son. Currently working as the receptionist in Marcella's Gym, she takes notice of Jai Kumar, possibly because she recognizes in Jai a fellow soul seeking redemption and healing. She forms a bond with Jai that blossoms into a romance on his path to redemption in the ring.

# FULL CAST

Dennis	DANNY TREJO (MACHETE)
Marcella	VERÓNICA FALCÓN (QUEEN OF THE SOUTH, OZARK, WHY WOMEN KILL)
Jai Kumar	VISHY AYYAR
Marcus	ANDREW GRAY (POWER RANGERS)
Melissa	TAYLOR TREADWELL (BIG LITTLE LIES, NIGHT & DAY, RAY DONOVAN, VAMPIRE DIARIES)
Ravi	OMI VAIDYA (3 IDIOTS)
Priya	SULEKA MATHEW (CLAWS, DAVINCI'S INQUEST, MEN IN TREES)
Rishi	JASPAL BINNING (NEWSROOM)
Mrs. Kumar	RANJITA CHAKRAVARTY (NEVER HAVE I EVER)
Tarsem	JASON JACK EDWARDS (UTOPIA, THE CHI)
Roma	RASHAANA SHAH (MANJHI: THE MOUNTAIN MAN, COLOURS OF PASSION)
Fight Announcer	CALVIN PETERS (SNOWFALL, STATION 19, 9-1-1, NEW AMSTERDAM)
Fight Doctor	HOPE ADAMS (LOVE KILLS)
Fight Referee	JACOB PEACOCK (STREET SURVIVORS, GIFT OF FEAR, MAYBE SOMEDAY)
Policewoman	MEGHAN MCDONOUGH (GOOD INTENTIONS, HOLD ON, THE BURGER)
Influencer Sabrina	JAMISON MCDERMOTT (POWER BOOK IV: FORCE, NEVER HAVE I EVER)



# THE FILMAKERS | CINEMATOGRAPHER | EDITOR | COMPOSER

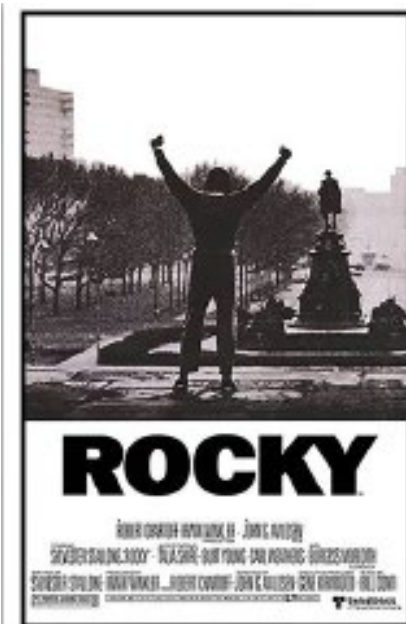
**CINEMATOGRAPHER** DEREK FISHER

**EDITOR** CHRISTOPHER CIBELLI

**COMPOSER** DARREN MORZE



# A FILM IN THE VEIN OF:



# PRESS

## FILM FESTIVALS



# PRESS

## DEADLINE



EXCLUSIVE: Danny Trejo (Machete) and Veronica Falcón (Ozark, Perry Mason, Jungle Cruise) are set to star in American Underdog, an independent sports drama making the feature directorial debut for Peruvian-American filmmaker Gustavo Martin.

The emotionally charged, character-driven drama set in the world of MMA starts production in Chicago this week. Amateur MMA fighter Vishy Ayyar of Indian American origin plays “Jai,” an ex-con on a soulful path wrestling with personal redemption when outside circumstances pit him in the ring against a fierce opponent “Marcus” played by Indigenous

actor and professional MMA fighter Andrew Gray (Power Rangers Megaforce). Trejo portrays “Dennis” who reluctantly comes out of retirement to train his former student, while Falcón steps in the role of a local gym owner and community legend “Marcella” shepherding “Jai” in his return to fighting.

Naveen A. Chathapuram (The Last Victim, Brown Nation, Ca\$h), Rashaana Shah (IFC’s Bollywood Hero), and Cristy Coors Beasley (The Westsiders, LonelyGirl15) are producing. Exec producer Chaitra Vedullapalli, who brings to the film her vast network of Women-In-Cloud, marking their initial foray into features via #MxW Ventures; The organization’s mission is to grant access to women and allies from the tech industry into entertainment to help shape meaningful narratives and ensure proper representation and visibility of otherwise marginalized groups.

The multi-award-winning script written by Martin and Matthew Mascia has attracted an outstanding international cast including Suleka Mathew (Your Honor, Mayfair Witches, Claws), Taylor Treadwell (Big Little Lies, Knight and Day, Vampire Diaries), Omi Vaidya (3 Idiots), Ranjita Chakravarty (Never Have I Ever) and Jaspal Binning (Newsroom, Brown Nation). Producers have made a noteworthy alliance with brand and media titan Sheru Aangrish and his Sheru Classic IFBB Pro League MMA Show, with plans to integrate the film into the wildly popular expo shows across the globe.

American Underdog is a production of Peach Partners in association with Mulberry Films, MxW Ventures and Slated.

Trejo is represented by Amsel, Eisenstadt, Frazier & Hinojosa Inc.; Falcón by APA; Iyer and Treadwell by S+C Management; Mathew by John Crosby Management and SDB Partners; Vaidya by Kerner Management & Associates and Roger Paul Inc.; Chakravarty by BRS / Gage Talent Agency; Binning by JMason Entertainment; and Gray by Established Artists.



# Q&A with Director and Co-writer, Gustavo Martin Benites

## **Can you give us an overview of the film. What is the message you're trying to convey with this story?**

"American Underdog" is a story of redemption centering around Jai, a 45 year old MMA fighter who gets back into the sport out of a need to prove to himself that he is still the fighter he once was years ago. It's about a man who finds the courage to be true to himself despite family opposition and the physical challenge it poses for him as a middle aged man.

The film is a drama first, punctuated with moments of action. I wanted to tell a story that had the conventions of a sports narrative but grounded in a strong and relatable personal story.

One of the main themes I wanted to tackle, is one of identity, and how everyone is constantly defining who you are. People continually make assumptions on others based on several factors in one's life including your job, your religion, your associations, and even the way you lean politically. Now more than ever in this society, we have labels for each other.

Social media has also greatly contributed to how hyper-obsessed we are with our public image. Because for better or worse, Social Media extrapolates on your public image. People are hailed as heroes because of a good deed shared by millions on tick tock, and by the same token lives are also ruined because something negative about you spreads. Your reputation can really be on the line.

In this atmosphere, it can be difficult for someone to find their grounding and present themselves honestly. Some may be too afraid to put the real version of themselves out there, in the fear that it will somehow have an impact in their lives in a negative way. It takes a lot of courage to look within yourself and define yourself on your own terms and put yourself out

there proudly.

In the story, Jai gets caught up in both scenarios; first seen as a hero when he's featured performing a heroic act, then as a villain when secrets become uncovered. During the narrative he will have to find the courage to define himself on his own accord.

Another aspect of the story, is the message that it is never too late to pick yourself up and move forward with the life you truly want. There's are several characters in the film who have suffered set backs, and we see how it has uniquely affected their lives and how they carve out their own path towards redemption.

I feel we are all living with a certain amount of regret in our lives. I believe it's important to give ourselves some grace, accept our shortcomings and learn to forgive ourselves in order to get up and try again.

## **What is it like to be directing your first feature?**

It's a rush! It's such an amazing experience - and one which seemed to come very quickly. After me and my co-writer had a good draft of the script, there was a bit of a waiting period in which money was being raised, and actors were being approached by producers. We'd moved on to work on other things, so it caught us off guard one day, when we got word that Danny Trejo was interested. That's what kicked this all into high gear. Everyone quickly got on the same page we were off to prep a film. I dropped everything and headed straight into prep. I was in the middle of a job too on a TV show, and worked it out with my boss to find a replacement so I could leave ASAP for this opportunity. The project came together within a matter of months.

On a personal level, It means a lot for me to finally be making a feature. It's been a long hard road, working in the film industry in various roles,

and making my short films on the side. I have our Producer Naveen to thank for recognizing my talents and bringing me on board his own projects first before offering me a chance to direct this one. I honestly wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him.

It's also significant for me as a latino filmmaker, and even more specifically, as a Peruvian filmmaker. There aren't many of us Peruvians making films. We're a rarity in the film industry.

So not only did I make my family proud, I've got a lot of support from people in my home country too. And I'm proud to represent. Peru does not have much of a film output. Only a handful of films are made there every year, and only people of affluence really get to make them. So for a young Peruvian like myself to have a million dollar feature is a pretty big deal.

If you follow my story from the beginning, it's a pretty amazing series of events that have led me here. From a poor middle class family, to suddenly needing to move to the US under an asylum plea, to studying film in the US, to finally working in the film industry in Chicago. The odds are mounted up against me as an immigrant, a latino, and even living here, with someone in my financial bracket. It's a miracle I'm here! So yes, I'm incredibly grateful.

And as far as making the film itself, It was a thrilling experience every day I was on set. It may have been stressful at times, and very difficult. But the excitement always overwhelmed all other feelings within me.

### **How did you approach the film visually?**

From the inception of the story, I've always wanted this film to have a strong singular point of view. That meant that our protagonist had to be in every single scene, and we'd never cut away to another character. This rule loosens up a little bit as the narrative develops and other characters come into the picture, but for the most part, the events in the film develop right in front of Jai, and strictly from his vantage point.

I feel this approach gives everything an added bit of intensity and sometimes suspense because you're with this character literally the entire time. This approach concentrates the drama in a subtle way because you unconsciously sense this obsessiveness between the camera, and the main character.

Along with this approach, my DP and I embraced what called an "elevated documentary" look. It meant that we used a documentary style as a starting point, but it is not a chaotic run and gun scenario. It is a very choreographed and controlled look. But the end goal is for it to look "off the cuff".

This aesthetic also served our budget. We knew going into filming, we were only going to have so many resources, and a documentary aesthetic would lend itself well to our low budget approach. Almost the entire film is hand held, and while we had some lighting equipment for some of the more stylized scenes, in others we had a lot of freedom because we lit for a general area. And in either scenario, re-finding our set ups or adjusting our blocking was easy because our camera was very nimble and untethered from bulky equipment.

Much like in a documentary, sometimes our approach meant we focused more on capturing a moment, or series of moments, and then we focused on finding the right moment in the editing room. We did this for training montages, and some intimate moments between Jai and Melissa, our two main characters.

For the fight sequences, again, we focused on capturing the fight as real as possible. We focused on the choreography and then found the rhythm in the editing room. A lot of the fight was filmed within the cage in order to add that extra bit of intensity to the those sequences. It was a less flashy approach, and more akin to if a documentary camera person were to jump inside the cage with the fighters and just start filming.

We had just one lighting set up for the entire deal - which was the real set up one would see at a fight. We literally rented a real cage and real

truss, both which are used in real local fights here in Illinois. All the lighting in the scene came from real lights that are on those trusses. The result looks quite amazing.

**The cast is very diverse. Was this a conscious choice on your part?**

I think the cast wound up being diverse because the people behind the camera were diverse. We had such a wide breath of cultures and nationalities working on this project. We had, Indian, Hispanic, Italian, Peruvian, Moroccan, Bosnian. It was a beautiful melting pot of ideas and personalities, and I think we simply wanted that representation on screen.

In essence, the casting of the project naturally flowed out of who we all are as people and what cultures we pertain to. I think this translated into a certain authenticity on the screen. Jai's family for example, celebrates Diwali, because our actor Vishy, also celebrates it in his culture. And because of this connection, we had several automatic consultants when it came time to create Diwali on screen.

It's important to have this representation because media is still very late in properly representing the way the world looks when you step out into the street. There are many tried and true patterns

in casting, and in most cases we opted to cast an unknown or someone from an under represented group.

The diversity in casting also meant casting for authenticity. The MMA instructor who leads a class in the film, for example, is played by a real MMA instructor. The photographer in the film who takes Jai's promo stills, is a real photographer who is a friend of ours and does that for a living. He even brought out his own equipment for the scene. This extra attention to casting, I think adds a flavor that you wouldn't get if you hired only actors for these roles.

