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“La Camioneta: The Journey of One American School Bus”

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La Camioneta: The Journey of One American School Bus

Kendall's eye for untold stories, as well as his instinct for catching evocatively framed images on the fly, mark him as a name to watch.

By [ANDREW BARKER](#)



With:

(Spanish, English dialogue)

First-time feature helmer Mark Kendall’s “La Camioneta” boasts an odd, not entirely promising premise, entirely concerned as it is with tracking a decommissioned American school bus from the auction floor to its refurbishment as a Guatemalan public-transport vehicle. Happily, first impressions couldn’t be more wrong here, as the film wrings an almost bizarre amount of political, humanistic and spiritual substance out of this limited frame. Kendall’s eye for untold stories, as well as his instinct for catching evocatively framed images on the fly, mark him as a name to watch.

The basic moral thrust of the story — that the refuse of the First World can be adopted and lovingly resurrected by the Third World — contains a rather obvious grand lesson, though it’s not one the filmmaker over-stresses. Kendall seems to realize how much more powerfully minor epiphanies can register when they aren’t spelled out, and appropriately, the film contains no narration or explanatory onscreen text. It simply tells the story of the bus and those whose lives it crosses, leaving all exegesis up to the viewer.

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The story begins in Pennsylvania, from which Kendall rides with the auctioned-off bus down through the U.S. and Mexico, all the way to a Guatemalan junkyard. Here, the bus is painstakingly renovated by a group of artisans, while its new owner, for whom running a local bus route is a major step up from farmwork, waits anxiously to get the vehicle on the road.

There are two primary reasons why “La Camioneta” works. The first is that Kendall’s laissez-faire approach of simply following the bus from station to station happens to uncover a range of intriguing, immensely sympathetic subjects. The second is that he’s more interested in process — the simple act of making things and performing a job — than message. One scene takes an extended, loving look at a bus painter as he obsesses over the taped-off patterns on the side of the vehicle, adjusting, trimming and consulting with serious diligence. Like the rest of the film, this sequence should be dull, but instead exudes a strange fascination.

There’s plenty of low-key philosophy here, especially from an early subject whose entire life is consumed with buying school buses at U.S. auctions, navigating them through the perilous backroads of Mexico, then heading straight back to buy another one. Like most of the film’s characters, he acknowledges that this life is hard and that his place in it is a little absurd, but his cheerful stoicism registers higher than any underlying despair.

Kendall doesn’t underplay his subjects’ hardships, and he certainly devotes time to the dangers faced by bus drivers, who are routinely shaken down and, with alarmingly increasing frequency, sometimes even killed by racketeers. Visits to a local police station and a government debate over the issue underline its seriousness, as do the worried looks from drivers’ wives as they venture off into the breach.

Featuring sharply intuitive camerawork, the film looks great for its means, and manages to convey the striking beauty of the Guatemalan countryside without brushing past the destitution of so many who live there. A late scene — in which scores of newly renovated buses, bedecked with flowers and decorations, are blessed by a priest before heading out on the road — is a particular highlight.