

'These Days,' showcasing Brentwood's Salvadoran community, screens at Hamptons Film Festival



Billy Mayorga Reyes, from left, Kelly Cano Reyes, Jenny Arteaga, Amy Arteaga Ochoa and Bryan Vallardes star in a scene from "These Days." Credit: These Days Productions, LLC

By Rafer Guzmán

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Brentwood's Salvadoran community will be in the spotlight at the Hamptons International Film Festival this weekend.

"These Days," a drama filmed in Brentwood using largely local actors and crew, will screen Sunday at 5:15 p.m. at the East Hampton Regal UA as part of the festival's Views from Long Island section.

Written and directed by Junior Gonzalez, "These Days" tells the story of a street-wise Salvadoran American teenager who expresses himself through painting. Gonzalez, 45 — and himself Salvadoran — grew up in San Jose, California, but moved to New York in 2016 hoping to further his filmmaking career. Gonzalez said he discovered Brentwood after meeting a native, Eranuvia Castillo, who would eventually become his wife and a co-producer on the film. After spending

many a weekend with Castillo's family in the neighborhood, Gonzalez began to consider it as a shooting location.

"I was just working on the story and I had a draft, but there was definitely something missing," Gonzalez said. "And it just gradually grew on me. I was like, 'Maybe this is all in front of me for a reason.'"

A local anti-violence organization, S.T.R.O.N.G. Youth (the acronym stands for Struggling to Reunite Our Next Generation) helped Gonzalez find several actors, including his Salvadoran-Guatemalan star, Billy Mayorga Reyes. A 16-year-old Brentwood High School student and former foster child, Mayorga — as he prefers to be called — describes himself as not too dissimilar from the at-risk character he plays.

"I'm not gonna lie, I was a troubled kid," Mayorga said. While auditioning for Gonzalez at the urging of a youth program counselor, Mayorga found himself enjoying the process of reading a script alongside other young actors. "And a week later," he said, "I get a call saying I got the main role."

With a budget of roughly \$80,000, much of it raised through crowdfunding, Gonzalez shot "These Days" over two weeks in July 2021 at locations all over Brentwood. Locals will recognize a number of landmarks in the film, including St. Luke Roman Catholic Church, the abandoned buildings of the former Pilgrim State Hospital and El Pulgarcita restaurant on Second Ave. The house where Mayorga's character paints a mural belongs to a relative of one of the film's producers.

"There really aren't films about highlighting Salvadoran culture and also a specific neighborhood," Gonzalez said. "That's another part of the reason why I wanted to go that route and take Brentwood, to let people know we're also here in the United States contributing."

One thing Gonzalez omitted from his film: the gang violence that has put Brentwood in the headlines for so many years. "I know what Brentwood went through," Gonzalez. "And now the culture is evolving, and that's where my film comes in. We're evolving from that to be more positive."

Gonzalez has since moved back to the Bay Area with his wife but plans to attend the Hamptons screening of "These Days" along with several cast members, including Mayorga, who says he's considering a career in film or music production.

“It’s not all bad things coming from Brentwood,” Mayorga said. “This is a good spot, I don’t care what anybody says.”



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