Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

#Prayfor(inserthere)

Allison Smartt · Wednesday, February 21st, 2018

Andy Allo croons an acoustic version of her song “Northern Lights” in the darkened bar of the Hotel Cafe. I sit alone near the back, an empty glass of water, and a tiny flickering candle rests in the center of the table. I listen to Andy’s contralto voice whisper the lyrics “…run until I run out of breath…” into the microphone so intimately that it feels as if she is singing solely to me. It’s August of 2017 and I had yet to figure out the idea of my next film project. As a rule, I commit to completing one film project each year, but this year nothing I had written inspired me enough to want to shoot it, and the months of 2017 were fading fast. But it was this moment, Allo crooning seven words that implanted an image in my head; a small, shirtless African-American boy running carefree through a field, only to have his joy cut short by the presence of two adult men. Though the image of the African-American child would evolve as the concept grew, it served as the genesis of what would become my 2018 short film: a social commentary on global anxiety, tragedy, and social media titled #Prayfor.

I wanted to make a film about the rising anxiety I felt was percolating throughout America and abroad. Since 2016, we have seen our world change so drastically with no glimmer of hope in sight. Constant news of death, tragedy, crumbling government regimes; if you looked at the world through the lens of CNN, it would seem it was the end of times.

2017 only brought more tragedy, and deeper chasms between communities. We ushered in a vitriolic president; world leaders used nuclear weapons as measuring sticks; racists crawled out of hiding into broad daylight; and we banned people solely based on their birth country. Society was a tug of war between those who believed that America could advance towards a bright future, and those who claimed America would be better off only if we regressed to traditions of our past.

All the while, the Earth seemed to be running a fever to cure the virus plaguing her immune system. Every part of the world was suffering hurricanes, wildfires, floods, mudslides, and earthquakes, with every breaking news headline, a pattern emerged. We read and shared the news over social media, offering condolences with an overused and meaningless platitude: “#prayfor_____.” It was the go-to hashtag after concerts were laced with explosives, after automatic weapons targeted people at nightclubs, after hurricanes wiped out the resources of states and villages, and I realized we had become numb to the horrific headlines. Our emotions had become paralyzed by the rapid ingestion of knowledge.

It was loathsome enough that politicians offered “thoughts and prayers,” only to forgo any real policy changes that could prevent these types of acts in the future. And there was also a disparity

in what communities received social media condolences through hashtags or profile picture filters. Facebook offered the option to change your profile picture to the French flag when the November 2015 attacks in Paris occurred. #PrayforParis received 3,625,074 hashtags across Twitter and Instagram. But the same outpour wasn't offered when attacks occurred in Syria, Mogadishu, or Nigeria. The hashtags became exclustionary when they didn't fit easily into a particular narrative.

#Prayfor isn't an admonishment to the people who used the hashtag; it is a response to the growing helplessness that has gripped us as a society. How can we express enough empathy for every single tragedy when they happen so rapidly, leaving no time to think reflect, or feel?

#Prayfor is an expression of these anxieties. It is a physical manifestation of powerlessness in the face of never ending tragedy. With color and dance, it reminds us that our anger, hurt, desperation, and confusion is valid and exists because it seeks to be expressed and experienced fully – not just through the tiny screens of our phones.

by Aeryn Michelle Williams (Creator/Director)

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When Aeryn first shared the #Prayfor Indiegogo with me, I was immediately intrigued by her idea. I felt a deep connection with her motivations and goals for #Prayfor, but admittedly, I had no idea how the final product would look.

Later, when Aeryn shared the film and text of #Prayfor with me and asked me to sound design it, I said yes immediately. I deeply identified with the expressions of anxiety and desperate hope expressed through the faces, bodies, and text of #Prayfor. I wanted to make the sounds personal, and she let me run wild with ideas.

In the opening sequence, we take in a man as he takes in the skyline. We slowly close in on his profile and zoom in on his ear, before retreating again. What did he hear as he looked out over LA?

I used personal recordings that made me feel sad, angry, scared, hopeless: flamenco jaleo and palmas that erupted at a friend's party I attended in Puerto Rico nine months before Maria. Cheers and jeers at an anti-Trump rally echoing through the 2nd Street tunnel in downtown LA. Chants from the protests at LAX when the Muslim Ban hit. The sounds of water, and explosions, anger, and fear.

And even though it eventually gets calmer and more hopeful, we ultimately return to what he first heard in that opening sequence. Not to make some sort of defeatist, hopeless point that we'll never escape the cycle of tragedy, but because in order to achieve find empathy and hope, we need to acknowledge the cycle's existence. We need to dig in to it, to our responses to it, and learn when and how to fight it.

by Allison Smartt (Sound Designer/Composer)

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