presents

AMERICAN FACTORY

A film by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert
Running Time: 113min

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In post-industrial Ohio, a Chinese billionaire opens a new factory in the husk of an abandoned General Motors plant, hiring 2,000 blue-collar Americans still recovering from the effects of the 2008 recession. Working side-by-side with experienced Chinese workers, the locals are optimistic about the future for the first time in almost a decade. But early days of hope give way to setbacks as high-tech China collides with working-class America, and issues of language and culture become seemingly insurmountable walls between clashing factions.

*American Factory*, the new film from Academy Award®-nominated directors Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, documents the revitalization of one long-shuttered factory while providing a startling glimpse into a global economic realignment now playing out in towns and cities across the country — and around the world. Granted generous access to the factory, and with the in-depth participation of its employees, Bognar, Reichert and their team spent three years following Fuyao Glass America’s launch of a state-of-the-art glassmaking facility employing hundreds of Chinese and thousands of Midwestern workers in the American heartland [‘American’ and ‘America’ seemed a bit redundant so close to each other here]. Capturing surprisingly candid moments of people ranging from the visionary billionaire who financed the enterprise to American and Chinese workers on the factory line, *American Factory* presents a microcosmic view of a global phenomenon that could represent a new normal for the American working class.

**PRODUCTION CREDITS**

Participant Media presents *American Factory*. Produced and directed by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert. Cinematography is by Steven Bognar, Aubrey Keith, Jeff Reichert, Julia Reichert and Erick Stoll. Original music is by Chad Cannon. Sound design is by Lawrence Everson. Editor is Lindsay Utz. Co-producers are Mijie Li and Yiqian Zhang. Producers are Jeff Reichert and Julie Parker Benello. Executive producers are Jeff Skoll and Diane Weyermann.
ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

On December 23rd, 2008, the General Motors factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the outskirts of Dayton, closed its doors for good. A mainstay of the area’s economy, the plant employed more than 2,400 people, all of whom lost their jobs that day. During the prolonged economic downturn that followed, many people also lost their savings, their homes and their hope — until 2014, when the sprawling facility was reinvented as Fuyao Glass America, a wholly Chinese-owned factory that produces automotive glass.

When Dayton-based documentarians Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert filmed the final days at the GM plant for their Academy Award®-nominated HBO film The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant, they never expected to return to the site. A longtime resident of the city, Bognar proudly points out that Dayton is a town with an impressive history of industry and innovation. It was the hometown of aviation pioneers the Wright Brothers, and Dayton-based companies at one point held more patents per capita than those in any other city in the United States. In the early to mid-1900s, it was the second-biggest automotive manufacturing town in the U.S. after Detroit.

“All those great manufacturing jobs led to a real, authentic middle class,” Bognar explains. “It was a blue-collar middle class: a good life but not based on office work. Like so many similar cities, Dayton’s economy started declining in the 1970s and ’80s. We took a punch to the gut in 2008 when the General Motors factory closed. At one point that place employed 6,000 people, all making good money. When the plant closed, it was a near death-blow to the town.”

Telling the stories of working people and their struggles for agency, power and a decent life has been a primary focus for Bognar and Reichert as filmmakers, both individually and as co-directors. With this film, they have returned to their exploration of the average American’s struggle to have a life of promise and purpose as they face powerful but indifferent forces, including the current upheaval brought on by globalization.

“The days of having a decent job for decades, one that you could eventually retire from, are over,” [some people still have decent jobs, it’s the long-term thing that’s really over for all of us] notes Reichert. “Where do so-called average folks have leverage? Can they still get a toe-hold on the climb towards something better?”

Reichert’s almost 50 years of chronicling lives that are often forgotten or ignored began with 1971’s Growing Up Female, the first feature documentary to grow out of the Women’s Liberation Movement. For the past two decades, she and Bognar have forged an impressive body of work that is deeply steeped in the Midwestern working class, including a groundbreaking interactive website called Reinvention Stories that chronicled Daytonians coping with economic changes. [trying to avoid the use of ‘stories’ twice in the same sentence]
When Cao Dewang, founder, chairman and CEO of the Fuyao Glass Industry Group, acquired the old GM factory as the American headquarters of his multinational Fuyao Glass, he wanted to commission a film that would memorialize a significant milestone in the company and the community’s history. Given Bognar and Reichert’s history, they were uniquely qualified, but a commission was out of the question.

“We’re independent filmmakers,” Bognar says. “We made it clear we wouldn’t do it as a project for Fuyao, but we were open to the idea of an actual documentary in which we would retain editorial control. We told them that to really dive deep, we’d need access to the factory floor, to meetings, to the boardroom — to everything.”

The largest manufacturer of automotive glass in the world, with clients that include GM, Ford, Honda, Toyota and many other auto manufacturers, Fuyao’s factories were already operating in eight countries in addition to China. With a generous tax credit from the Ohio Tax Credit Authority, the Chairman envisioned the Moraine plant as the start of a major American expansion.

“Chairman Cao specifically wanted the GM plant because of the symbolic value of it,” says Reichert. “Building a whole new plant might have been cheaper and easier in the long run, but he saw how much it would mean to America and the Americans in this town.”

The Chairman recognized the historic value of an accurate portrayal of the company and its first major American outpost. “A lot of companies might not immediately say, let’s invite a documentary crew in to film as we do the most challenging project we’ve ever attempted,” observes Bognar, “but the Chairman said, let’s do it. Let’s have a record of it.”

Production on *American Factory* began in early 2015. When the filmmakers first arrived, the vast building — which is large enough to hold 41 football fields — was empty, according to producer Jeff Reichert. “It still needed to be cleaned out and filled with machinery,” he remembers. “When I got there, it was very much a work in progress.”

The crew shot for over a year with no outside funding. But by 2016, as the inherent drama of the situation began to reveal itself, they put together a 10-minute clip reel that was screened at IFP’s Independent Film Week in New York. “Suddenly there was a lot of interest in it,” says Bognar.

One of the first people to view the footage was Julie Parker Benello, co-founder of Brooklyn and San Francisco-based nonprofit Chicken & Egg Pictures, which supports women nonfiction filmmakers. The organization had just awarded Julia Reichert its $50,000 Breakthrough Filmmaker Award and Benello urged her and Bognar to put the factory film on the front burner. “It was so arresting, and it’s a story we don’t know,” Benello says. “I just couldn’t stop thinking about it and I said I would love to come on as a producer. In my mind this was always a story about reverse globalization. For a long time, American jobs have been going south or overseas. The Chairman was putting $500 million into an
American plant that employs American workers. And this type of thing was starting to happen all over the country.”

The film also caught the eye of Oscar®-winning documentarian and Field of Vision co-founder Laura Poitras, who contacted Participant Media’s President of Documentary Film and Television Diane Weyermann to arrange a meeting. “From the early footage, it was clear they had incredible access to management as well as the workers,” says Weyermann. “But it’s not just having access that matters, it’s what a filmmaker can do with the access. Julia and Steven are extraordinary verité filmmakers who could capture the drama and identify compelling characters as the story unfolded in real time. We saw the potential for an incredibly strong, critically important story that needed to be told.”

The timing, according to Bognar, was fortuitous. “It was right after the 2016 election and suddenly everyone wanted to know what was going on in the Midwest,” he recalls. “We have huge respect for Participant and Diane and the team there. They have built a great legacy. When we finally agreed we were going to work together, it felt really organic and natural and right.”

Weyermann has been following the careers of Bognar and Reichert for many years, she says, and this is the kind of storytelling they excel at. “They have no agenda, so you get an unusually rich complexity. The story of the so-called forgotten working-class blue-collar workers in the Midwest became a massive conversation in the wake of Trump’s election. When they came to us we jumped in very enthusiastically.”

A NEW DAY IN DAYTON

The reopening of the facility was a major event in Dayton. The prospect of jobs returning to Ohio created enormous excitement, which, in turn, attracted lots of local news coverage. For a workforce that had been left behind by the recent economic recovery, it seemed like the lifeline they had been waiting for.

“People were happy and eager to learn,” says Julia Reichert. “They were excited to have a paycheck again. The pay scale started low, but it was better than working at the Payless Shoes distribution center, at McDonald’s or Kohl’s. It was higher pay, plus good benefits, and it was something you could be proud of; your product was going to be seen in America’s cars. People were grateful and full of hope.”

The filmmakers started filming in February 2015 without knowing how long they would spend shooting. “Julia and I try to be really open to what’s happening,” Bognar explains. “It became clear pretty early on that there are lots of different points of view in this story and they are all important. There’s the Chairman: an entrepreneur, innovator, billionaire. There’s his team of executives who have moved to America to make this happen. There are the local executives, folks from Ohio, like factory Vice President Dave Burrows. And then there are the workers on the factory floor, both Chinese and American. All of
they are under lots of pressure to make this thing succeed. And then you’ve got the language and cultural barriers that become mountains everyone has to climb.”

To ensure that the Chinese managers’ and workers’ perspectives were accurately represented, Bognar and Reichert asked a pair of Chinese producers to join their team. “We met these two amazing young filmmakers, Mijie Li and Yiqian Zhang,” Bognar says. “They both grew up in China and are bilingual. They are each talented filmmakers. They could have real conversations with people about how hard the factory work is, or what it’s like to be so far from their wives and kids. That’s when we really started connecting with some of the Chinese [employees].”

As the factory roars back to life, the Fuyao employees begin to find ways to connect with one another. The Americans invite the Chinese for holiday celebrations. The Chinese join their friendly Midwestern hosts for traditional barbecues. Some of the workers go target shooting and fishing together. Friendships are forged that overcome cultural and language barriers.

Longtime Fuyao employee Wong He is excited about his job in America, although it means leaving his family back in China and sharing a small apartment in Dayton with several other men. He says that for him, Fuyao America is the perfect place to work, even though he speaks no English when he arrives. A 20-year veteran of the blazing glass furnaces, where temperatures routinely exceed 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit, he wears the burn scars up and down his arms like badges of honor. He respects the work ethic of his American colleagues, some of whom hold down two jobs to get by. “I always thought Americans lived a superior and comfortable life,” Wong says. “I thought they didn’t have to make any sacrifices.”

During this honeymoon period, the outlook for Fuyao Glass America is rosy, according to Julia Reichert. But as time goes on and the factory continues to bleed red ink, the mood begins to shift. “The hammer comes down when profits don’t materialize,” she says. “New factories in China are used to making profits much more quickly, we heard. After a year and a half, the atmosphere at the plant becomes very tense.”

**CULTURE CLASH**

The pressure mounts on workers and managers to meet projections by working longer and harder. The film contrasts the customary eight-hour American workday of the Americans with the 10- and 12-hour workdays of the Chinese. “Only eight hours a day. That’s an easy life,” says one supervisor in China to a visiting American colleague.

There are other differences as well. “Workers in China are given orders and they tackle them,” says Julia Reichert. “Here in the U.S., workers want to know why they’re being asked to do something. They also expect there will be some praise, maybe a ‘Thank you’ afterward for a job well done. But we
heard that’s not such a regular thing in China. So the American workers felt unappreciated, while management felt [those workers] lacked loyalty to the company.”

Chairman Cao, whose impoverished childhood during the Cultural Revolution drove him to become one of China’s wealthiest citizens, seems mystified by his employees’ discontent. The Chinese workers who committed to leaving home and family behind for at least two years are also surprised by their co-workers’ demands. In an effort to acquaint local employees with company culture, a group of promising American supervisors are taken to Fuyao world headquarters in Fuqing, Fujian Province, China. In a festive celebration of company spirit, employees sing songs about Fuyao and its traditions, some written by the Chairman himself. Touring the factory floor, the visitors experience first-hand the regimentation and dedication the Chinese workers bring to their jobs. They are treated to lavish meals and entertainment that extols the benefits of working for the company.

“We saw what the burgeoning Chinese middle class looks like and how they live,” says Jeff Reichert. “Life in the factories and in the streets was a lot different than what we expected. We saw busy factories, sleek high-rises, people working long hours and working hard. But most people felt it was a pretty good job.”

THE RIFT WIDENS

Back in Ohio, the American workers are frustrated by Fuyao’s way of doing business. They are asked to train while off the clock. Raises that are promised don’t materialize. Safety measures are less strict. They feel disrespected. “They call us ‘the foreigners,’” observes one employee. Yet the perceived slight the Americans feel in hearing that phrase may not be intended at all by the Chinese, who use the phrase neutrally to mean someone who is non-Chinese.

As production ramps up, workplace injuries, some of them serious, begin to proliferate. “Everyone says they believe in safety,” says John Crane, safety manager for Fuyao Glass America at the time of filming. “But safe doesn’t pay the bills.” The company is eventually, and repeatedly, fined by OSHA. After filming was finished in December 2017, a Fuyao employee was accidentally crushed to death while working by a large stack of the float glass that gets shaped into windshields.

The initial spirit of good will was truly tested, says Jeff Reichert. “As time went on, new and different issues come up. We see a number of different changes of management structure,” he recalls. “The American executives are let go and replaced, which drives the two sides further apart. The film became about all the unanswered questions on both sides and seeing how this company would adapt.”
“We try not to judge people,” says Bognar. “It’s their right to have an opinion. If we’re going to present people’s points of view, we have to do it in a way that’s fair, even if it’s complicated. When you have clashing points of view, we want to present it.”

TWO TIGERS, ONE MOUNTAIN

As issues and frustrations grow, American Fuyao workers begin organizing, turning to the United Auto Workers union. A pitched battle begins, and the filmmakers document months of back and forth attempts by the company and the UAW to win the votes of the Fuyao workforce in Ohio. Pickets and boisterous rallies happen outside the plant. At early signs of union activity, the company hires a firm called Labor Relations Institute (LRI) to persuade workers, in repeated mandatory meetings, why a union at Fuyao would be a bad idea. Both sides spend considerably – in a filing with the U.S. Department of Labor, LRI states they were paid over $1 million dollars by Fuyao to fight the union campaign. Tensions rise as the union vote approaches. Wong cites an old Chinese saying, “One mountain cannot hold two tigers.”

For decades, the long-term economic security of the American working class has diminished, and with it many people’s sense of inclusion in the American Dream. With American Factory, Bognar and Reichert access their unique expertise to once again take audiences deep into the Midwest to hear voices that are often excluded from our national conversation. Are low-paying, insecure factory jobs the future of blue-collar Americans? What effect will that have on the American middle class?

“The way industries and economies are working has changed,” says Weyermann. “It’s so radically different today than it was even in the recent past. China’s emergence as an economic superpower is in the news every day. It’s become a critical issue to the economic well-being of this country and our future. I think that plays out right on the factory floor, and not just in the U.S., but on the Chinese factory floor as well.”

Private enterprise in China continues to grow, and Chinese investors have begun buying up iconic American brands, from perennial holiday-meal favorite Smithfield Ham to New York’s ritzy Waldorf Astoria hotel. With the huge flow of Chinese and other foreign investment into the U.S., what is happening in Dayton probably is not an isolated phenomenon, in Benello’s opinion. “From my perspective, bringing jobs to American soil is definitely a good thing. The question is: at what cost? There were jobs at the GM plant that paid upward of $28 an hour. Factory workers could send their kids to college. Now at Fuyao, that’s a $14-an-hour job.”

American Factory examines the human consequences of a new global economy as it plays out in one mid-sized, Midwestern American city. “It’s not just one particular Chinese entrepreneur who came in
and bought an empty plant,” says Weyermann. “There’s a massive global shift taking place, and I think understanding what it is and how it could impact the American economy and American workers in the long term makes this a particularly timely film to get in front of audiences today.”

MORE ON FUYAO GLASS AMERICA

While the filming period spans the tumultuous years between 2015 through 2017, Fuyao Glass America has been profitable for all of 2018. By early 2019, FGA employs 2,300 workers and promises to hire about 300 more. Starting hourly wage is now $14 per hour, and the company states that the average wage is now over $17 per hour.

According to the Dayton Daily News, the Ohio Tax Credit Authority granted Fuyao a 15-year tax credit worth up to nearly $10 million, which is based on Fuyao’s promises to hire 800 employees, generate an annual payroll of $32.5 million by the end of 2019, and stay at the Moraine facility for at least 18 years. Additional incentives total another $5 million.

The number of OSHA complaints against the company is down. However, in March, 2018, an Fuyao employee was accidentally killed while working.

FGA announced in January 2019 that it will spend $16 million to build a new processing center in South Carolina.
ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

**Cao Dewang** is the CEO, founder and Chairman of Fuyao Glass, the largest automotive glass manufacturer in the world. (Cao Dewang’s name is also translated as Cho Tak Wong.)

**John Gauthier** was president of Fuyao Glass America (FGA) during its launch phase.

**Dave Burrows** was a vice president of Fuyao Glass America during its launch phase.

**Shimeng He** is First Secretary for the Fuyao Communist Party Committee in Fuqing, the head of the Fuyao worker’s union, and Chairman Cao’s brother-in-law.

**Jeff Daochuan Liu** takes over as president of Fuyao Glass America after John Gauthier’s departure.

**Sherrod Brown** is the senior U.S. Senator from Ohio.

**Daquin “Leon” Liang** is lead supervisor in the Furnace area of the OEM Tempering department at the Dayton Fuyao Glass Factory and a fan of fishing & Hip Hop. OEM stands for “Original Equipment Manufacturing.”

**Wong He** is lead Furnace Engineer in OEM Tempering at Fuyao Glass America, and a 20-plus-year employee of Fuyao who admires his American co-workers’ work ethic.

**Jill Lamantia** is a forklift operator who lost her home when she was laid off by GM. When she first gets a job at Fuyao, Jill is living in her sister’s basement. Over time, Jill becomes an outspoken union advocate.

**Timi Jernigan** is a furnace technician at Fuyao Glass America and grateful to be one of the company’s early hires.
**John Crane**, safety manager for Fuyao Glass America, grapples with safety, injury and heat issues on the factory floor. John later resigns from the company.

**Shawnea Rosser** is a pre-treatment inspector for Fuyao Glass America whose hourly wage at GM was $28 and who starts working at Fuyao for $12 an hour. Shawnea is pronounced “Sha-NAY.”

**Cynthia Harper** is a lamination specialist at Fuyao who expresses her preference for unionization because of her safety concerns and history of not being listened to by employers.

**Robert “Bobby” Allen** is a team leader at Fuyao who worked at General Motors for 15 years, and who struggled with low-pay seasonal jobs for years before he was hired by Fuyao, which he calls “the best game in town.”

**Rob Haerr** is a furnace supervisor and Harley enthusiast who builds strong ties with the Chinese workers, inviting several for Thanksgiving dinner at his house.

**Rebecca Ruan O’Shaughnessy** was born in China, but moved to the US as a teenager. Rebecca becomes Fuyao Glass America’s first chief counsel, and a right hand person for the Chairman in the U.S.
ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

STEVEN BOGNAR & JULIA REICHERT (Directors, Producers) are Oscar®-nominated documentary filmmakers whose work has screened at Sundance, Telluride, SXSW and other major festivals, as well as on HBO and PBS.

Their film A Lion in the House, a co-production with ITVS, premiered at Sundance, screened on the PBS series “Independent Lens” and won a Primetime Emmy®. Their film The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant premiered at the 2009 Telluride Film Festival, screened on HBO, and was nominated for an Academy Award® for Best Documentary Short in 2010.

Their films have, for the most part, told stories of rank-and-file citizens grappling with questions of agency and how to have a decent life. Reichert’s work, in particular, spanning 50 years of filmmaking, has a through-line of concern for working-class and women’s stories.

Reichert was also Oscar®,-nominated for her documentary feature films Union Maids (1977) and Seeing Red: Stories of American Communists (1983). Her first film, Growing Up Female, was selected for the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. She is the 2018 recipient of the IDA Career Achievement Award.

Bognar’s films Personal Belongings, Picture Day and Gravel all premiered at the Sundance Film Festival.

JEFF REICHERT (Producer, Cinematographer) is a filmmaker and critic who lives in Brooklyn. His award-winning feature films include Gerrymandering (Tribeca Film Festival 2010), Remote Area Medical (Full Frame 2013), This Time Next Year (Tribeca Film Festival 2014), and Feast of the Epiphany (BAMcinemaFest 2018); and shorts Kombit (Sundance 2014), Nobody Loves Me (Camden 2017), and American Carnage (Field of Vision 2017). Since 2003 he has been the co-founder and editor of the online film journal Reverse Shot, now a publication of Museum of the Moving Image, and has written for numerous other publications including Film Comment, Filmmaker, Huffington Post and IndieWire.

JULIE PARKER BENELLO (Producer) is the founder of Secret Sauce Media, which produces and invests in surprising and timeless film projects. She co-founded Chicken & Egg Pictures in 2005 based on the shared belief that diverse women nonfiction storytellers have the power to catalyze change at home and around the globe. She is currently a producer on longtime collaborator Judith Helfand’s Love & Stuff, and was executive producer on United Skates (Tribeca 2018) and The Tale (Sundance 2018). Earlier in her career she co-produced Helfand’s documentary Blue Vinyl, served as a production executive for the
company Non Fiction Films, and was an archival researcher for the Discovery Channel series “Cronkite Remembers.” Benello serves on the board of SFFILM and is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ documentary branch.

**JEFF SKOLL (Executive Producer)** is an entrepreneur devoted to creating a sustainable world of peace and prosperity.

Inspired by the belief that a story well told can change the world, Skoll founded Participant Media in 2004. Participant Media is the world’s leading entertainment company focused on advocacy and social impact. Participant has produced more than 80 full-length narrative and documentary films that include *Spotlight, Contagion, A Fantastic Woman, Lincoln, The Help* and *Good Night and Good Luck*. Documentary films include *The Look of Silence, The Cove, Food, Inc., He Named Me Malala, CITIZENFOUR, Waiting for “Superman”* and *An Inconvenient Truth*.

These films collectively have garnered 56 Academy Award® nominations and 12 wins, including Best Picture for *Spotlight* and Best Foreign Language Film for *A Fantastic Woman*.

In addition to Participant Media, Skoll’s innovative portfolio of philanthropic and commercial enterprises includes the Skoll Foundation and Capricorn Investment Group – all coordinated under the Jeff Skoll Group umbrella.

**DIANE WEYERMANN (Executive Producer)** is President of Documentary Film and Television for Participant Media, a company dedicated to entertainment that inspires and empowers audiences to achieve social change. Participant’s recent documentary projects include *The Price of Free, RBG, America to Me, Far From the Tree, Human Flow, An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth To Power, The Music of Strangers: Yo-Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble* and *Zero Days*. Previous releases include the Oscar®-winning films *CITIZENFOUR* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Emmy®-winning *Food, Inc.*, and Emmy®-nominated *The Great Invisible*.

Prior to joining Participant in 2005, Weyermann was the director of the Sundance Institute’s Documentary Film Program. During her tenure at Sundance, she was responsible for the Sundance Documentary Fund, a program supporting documentary films dealing with contemporary human rights, social justice, civil liberties and freedom of expression from around the world.

Before her time at Sundance, Weyermann was the director of the Open Society Institute New York’s Arts and Culture Program, where she launched the Soros Documentary Fund (which later became the Sundance Documentary Fund).
CREDITS

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Julie Parker Benello

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  Spencer Davis
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Xiaoli Zhou
Jianhong Zhu

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Chinese School at the University of Dayton
Datayard
The Dayton Daily News
Dayton Dragons
Dayton History
Department of Theatre, Dance & Motion Pictures, Wright State University
EyeSteel Films
FilmDayton
Frye Mechanical
Greene County Career Center
IDFA Forum
IFP
JobsOhio
The Little Art Theatre
The Neon
Ohio Development Services Agency
Ohio Film Office
Shen’s Restaurant
Square One Salon
Troy High School
Taste of the World
Upper Deck Tavern
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