

Show Talks with Albert Evans: Ft. Brian Dang

[00:00:00] **Albert:** Hi, I'm Albert Evans. Welcome back to show talk today. We have a special guest Brian dang, who will talk about the Griswolds' Broadway vacation and explore with us the fascinating social history of the great American road trip. And with that said, Brian, take us away.

[00:00:38] **Brian:** Thanks Albert. Hi everyone. My name is Brian Dang, and my pronouns are they them? I'm a local playwright poet and Teaching artist. Some of my artistic homes include Writers in the Schools, Arts Core and Hugo House organizations that I teach with and Parley a local playwriting group, [00:01:00] that has fostered my playwriting for over five years now.

[00:01:03] I am a guest dramaturg for the fifth avenue theater. For this addition of Show Talks today, we will be discussing themes surrounding the musical, The Griswolds' Broadway Vacation, which is a world premier right on the fifth avenue theater stage. Before I get started, maybe grab a drink to keep you company. To jump right in the Griswolds' Broadway Vacation follows the Griswold family of four on their big New York City adventure. Where of course everything goes exactly according to plan, just kidding.

[00:01:41] The Griswolds' Broadway vacation is based on the Warner Brothers Vacation films, the first of which was National Lampoon's Vacation. That movie tracks the Griswold family as they travel from a Chicago suburb to Wally World, a fictional theme [00:02:00] park based on Disneyland in Southern California.

[00:02:04] This movie fits squarely into the camp of a road movie, broadly defined as a genre, heavily relying on a driving journey. For this Show Talk, I'm going to be tracking the history of the road movie, how road movies are often used as a way of examining American culture and how the Griswolds fit into that as a family.

[00:02:29] The road movie can be defined as quote, "an episodic journey or quest on the open road or undiscovered trail to search for escape. For example, while on the lamb, during a crime spree or to engage in a quest of some kind of goal, either a distinct destination or the attainment of love, freedom, mobility, redemption, the finding or rediscovering of one's self or coming of age psychologically or spiritually [00:03:00] the road often functioned as a testing ground or proving ground for the main characters." End quote, how did we get here and why does it sound so familiar?

[00:03:14] Let's start with history, the road movies, origins, start with the idea of journeys in storytelling itself. Christopher Morris, in the "Reflexivity of the Road Film" says that quote "The road film is considered an instance of the journey narrative whose Western paradigms are established" end quote.

[00:03:37] One could call the Odyssey by Homer, for example, a road movie, but instead of a car Odysseus is in a boat. This similarity is not a coincidence. It's largely by design and mutual inspiration. The design comes primarily from the storytelling structure called the hero's journey. The hero's [00:04:00] journey is one tool that can be used to compare ancient myths and modern stories. It was popularized by Joseph Campbell in 1949 and describes a mode of storytelling found primarily in Western stories. There are identifiable parts to a story that follows the Hero's Journey. One, a call to adventure, two, supernatural aid, three, challenges and temptations, four, abyss, five, revelation, six, transformation, seven, atonement, and eight, return.

[00:04:40] It is often represented through a circle, which is why it is also sometimes described as a cycle. This storytelling structure is not universal, nor does it fit the structure of every genre. The Hero's Journey is particularly individualistic, internal and extractive [00:05:00] in nature in terms of knowledge, production.

[00:05:02] However, this is also why the Hero's Journey is important to the road movie, the same Western perspectives and paradigms that influenced the lens of the Hero's Journey, also map onto the creation of the American highway system, and both came about around the same time. This may seem like a bit of a leap and connection so bear with me as I get through it.

[00:05:31] Cars are individualistic in nature and create a system of movement that silos and cuts people off from others. The American highway system spurred by car culture is a uniquely Western and perhaps uniquely American way of approaching movement systems. The creation of suburbs, enclaves of isolated living spurred by white flight from cities, spurred even more highway expansion. [00:06:00] The ubiquitous nature of highway's now in the us mimic and were developed through the same desires as Western expansion, Manifest Destiny and other arms of the colonialist project. This is the same idea of a hero, journeying into the unknown to establish themselves and transform.

[00:06:22] Dr. Neil Archer, a film studies professor says that one reason road movies appeared in American culture is through these factors. Archer says, quote, "I do think that there's a particular conjunction of car, culture, and

landscape that cohered in the USA in ways that the old continent of Europe was not naturally in a place to promote.

[00:06:47] Individuals and families were suddenly able to go on journeys of their own just with a car and thus became heroes of their own making in their own stories. The adventure [00:07:00] landscape was not the open sea or an ancient forest or a medieval kingdom, but instead the Western frontier of the us through stolen and then settled land.

[00:07:14] As a result, the road movie manifests itself through these uniquely Western and American cultural artifacts, the Hero's Journey and the American highway system. Now, how can something so steeped in a Western worldview, be a useful tool in examining and critiquing American culture. In the article mapping out the road, movie Giaco Furino says quote, "Yeah, we're a big country and we've gotten really good at mythologizing that bigness." Furino goes on to describe how the road movie has become some sort of modern Western in which drivers are "our [00:08:00] own cowboys and the highway is the frontier." However, it is here in this myth, making that the road movie has an opportunity to be something more.

[00:08:12] For example, if you live in Seattle, one can believe our politics are ubiquitous to the entirety of Washington. It only takes a fairly short drive, either south or east to discover that this is not true. And that Seattle is a bubble of its own. Travel, especially something that requires going through the country and not just over it like a plane exposes one to the country in a way that's staying put, does not. Hitting the road is ultimately a myth busting venture that unveils the country to any driver. The road movie is not only a powerful tool in physicalizing the idea of a personal journey, but also exemplifies the character's fears or anxieties of America.[00:09:00]

[00:09:00] For example, there is a two-minute scene in National Lampoons Vacation, the movie in which the Griswolds find themselves in a St. Louis neighborhood after Clark takes a wrong exit. The Griswold family begins to drive through a neighborhood through what appears to be the middle of the night. Ellen describes the city as dangerous and that they have no business being in an area like this.

[00:09:33] Clark responds by saying that "this is the part of America that we never see." Ellen says "that's good" to which Clark responds, "No, that's bad. We can't close our eyes to the plight of the cities. Hey, kids noticing all this plight?"

[00:09:54] In the background police sirens are heard and a gunshot at one point makes Clark [00:10:00] ask the kids to roll the windows up. All the extras in this scene, playing the residents are Black through an extended bit. A group of folks cons the Griswolds out of the rims to the car wheels. As they tell the Griswolds obtuse directions.

[00:10:19] After watching this scene, I couldn't get it out of my head. It exposes the true nature of the Griswold family, a sheltered white family that feels threatened by city life and sees predominantly black neighborhoods as filled with crime or quote "plight". This family, as they drove through the country, discovered an entirely different of hyper-policed citizens living in the same country as them.

[00:10:49] It is worth noting that this portrayal of the city is racist and exaggerated, and the movie itself imposes its perspective. However, the myth making [00:11:00] of city life versus suburban life, and the way cities with predominantly non-white neighborhoods are seen by suburbanites is very, very real. One sees this dynamic play out even in Seattle itself.

[00:11:14] Even if the movie exposes its perspective, unintentionally, this dissection of American culture becomes unveiled through a family on the road. Ultimately the Griswold family in 1983, the year that the National Lampoons Vacation movie came out and today in the Griswolds' Broadway Vacation are different and approached the city with a different lens.

[00:11:42] While this dynamic of the Griswolds as a nuclear middle class suburban family in the city also plays out in the Griswold's Broadway Vacation. It's with much more hilarity and luck in the family's favor that paints them more as an unknowing and well-meaning family, a different perspective [00:12:00] on approaching a new city than the one we saw in 1983. Ultimately every road movie becomes colored in its themes and messages by the identities of the characters on the trip and why they're on the trip in the first place.

[00:12:18] Depending on who you are driving across the us can be harrowing exciting, reflective eye-opening, or simply impossible. The individualistic nature of the road movie makes the identity of the character's hyper-focused and hyper relevant to their journey.

[00:12:38] As a result, the road, movie genre, as it exists in the U.S., becomes a powerful tool to comment on American culture and politics. As the country affects us all differently. Seeing the way the country views us can make us

renegotiate how we see ourselves. None of us can move through the [00:13:00] country the same.

[00:13:03] To wrap up here are just a few examples of how the road, movie genre examines the intersectionality of living in the U.S. Two movies that engage with class are *The Grapes of Wrath* based on J Steinbeck's novel, which portrays a family being driven out of their farm and heading west to California in search of a better life. And *Little Miss Sunshine*, which follows a rag tag and struggling family, as they navigate mental health, class, sexuality, and work life to try and get their young girl to a beauty pageant, they find at the end that they are not like the other girls for so many reasons.

[00:13:46] Two movies that engage in the discriminatory nature of healthcare access in the U.S. are *Unpregnant* a movie where two girls go on a road trip and cross state lines in need of an abortion. [00:14:00] And *The Living End* in which two lovers who are recently diagnosed with aids at the height of the epidemic, when the CDC was still calling it a fatal gay disease, decide to take to the road to live life to the fullest before what they feel is an inevitable death, a couple movies that engage with the intersectionality of race in the U.S. are

[00:14:23] *Smoke Signals*, which follows two friends who travel out of the Coeur d'Alene Indian Reservation, after their father dies, they discover more about themselves and their Native American identities in relationship to each other on the journey. And *the Green Book*, which is inspired by the true story of a 1962 tour of the Deep South by Black pianist, Don Shirley and Frank Balanga, Shirley's driver. The title is a reference to the Negro Motorist Green Book, a guidebook for black folks, traveling through the [00:15:00] U.S. to navigate Jim Crow laws. This Green Book is also referenced in the TV show *Lovecraft Country* in which a character writes for a similar guidebook and the characters who are Black are under threat of violence from White folks leveraging Jim Crow laws, as they hit the road to seek out answers about their family's history.

[00:15:25] This genre is not limited to film, of course, as we're here discussing the Griswolds' *Broadway Vacation*. A couple musicals or plays, I point you towards are *Vietgone* by Qui Nguyen, which is a musical that tracks two refugees of the Vietnam War, who attempt to find each other after landing in the United States and their story as told by their son. And the play, *The Walk Across America For Mother Earth* by Taylor Mac, which is about two suburban friends who join a nomadic utopia, engaging with [00:16:00] political activism and bedazzled drag.

[00:16:03] There are so, so many more, but I'll stop there. Thank you so much for listening to this Show Talk. I hope you feel more ready to see the world premiere of The Griswolds' Broadway Vacation. You can visit [fifthavenue dot org](http://fifthavenue.org) for more information about shows, tickets, and to find the study guide for The Griswolds' Broadway Vacation, which has more information about the show and goes into depth into other topics related to the show.

[00:16:32] See you later![00:17:00]