

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

of Emerson's broadcast journalism program, remembered as a 'legend' Jun 7, 9:30 am ECPS Survey of Undergraduates finds funding and tuition should be the top priority for inc

‘The Big Scary ‘S’ Word’ documents American socialism at Bright Lights Emerson film series

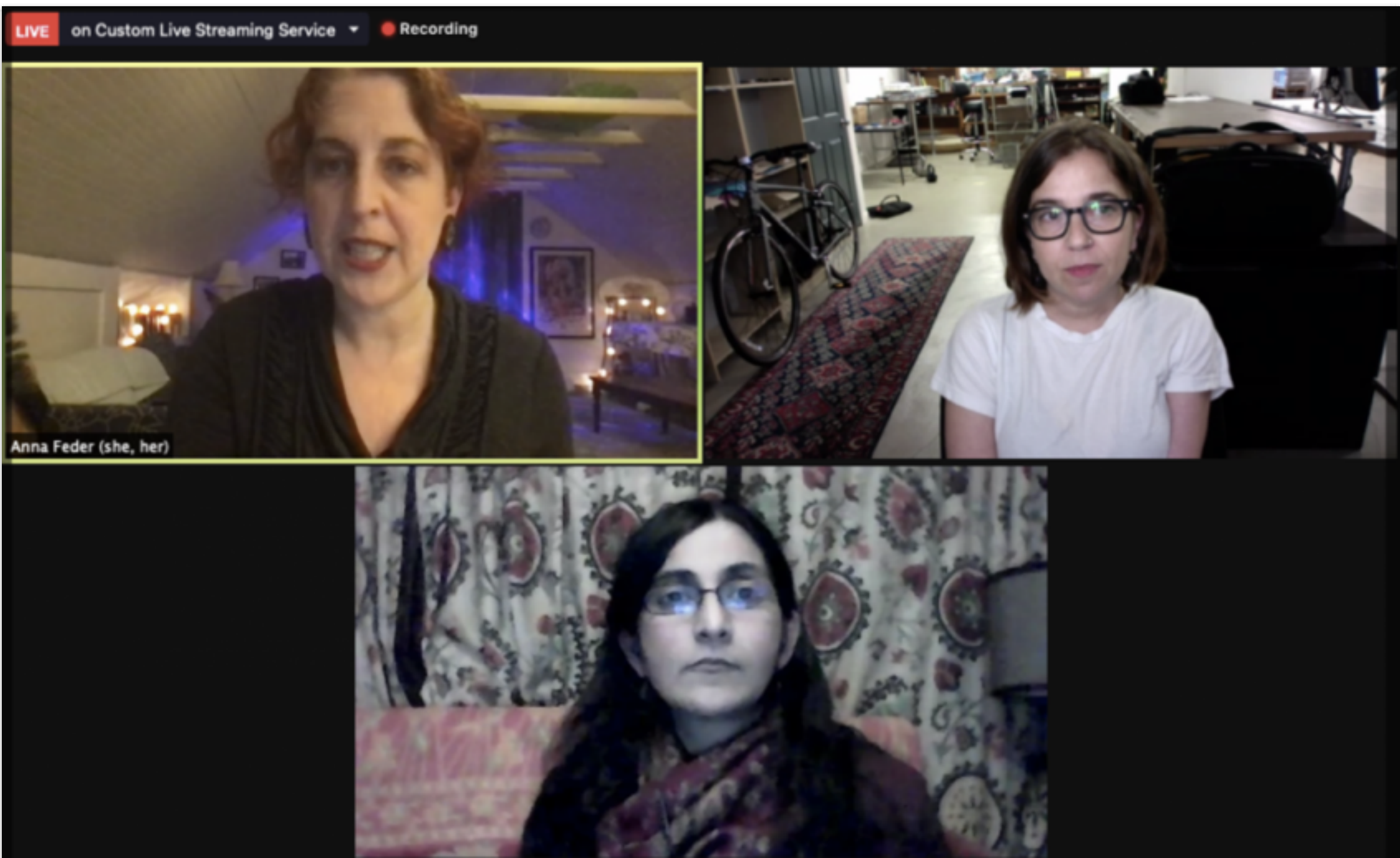


Photo: Karissa Schaefer

‘The Big Scary ‘S’ Word’ post-screening virtual discussion and Q&A

By Karissa Schaefer, Staff Writer, Living Arts February 7, 2021

A public school teacher and a former Marine turned to socialism due to their financial struggles in a documentary directed by Yael Bridge. The Big Scary ‘S’ Word documents the American socialist movement and the people aiming to create a socialist future for the U.S.

The film premiered on the ArtsEmerson page on Feb. 3 at 7 p.m., running through Feb. 4 at 8 p.m. It was presented by The Bright Lights Film Series, which is run by Emerson’s Department of Visual and Media Arts. The series’ mission is “to create community through cinema and [to welcome] both Emerson faculty, students, and staff as well as the general public,” according to ArtsEmerson.

Following the screening, Bridge and socialist Seattle city councillor Kshama Sawant hosted a 45-minute discussion. Audience members joined a Zoom meeting to participate in a Q&A. Anna Feder, the curator of the Bright Lights series, hosted the event.

Feder pointed out that the lack of the word “socialism” in the title may make more people want to watch the film to see what the message is. “I would definitely say everyone should watch the film,” Feder said.

The 83-minute documentary takes an in-depth look into the long-debated socialist ideology as it becomes more relevant in the 21st century. Emmy-nominated for the film Saving Capitalism, director Bridge uses expert interviews, including Harvard professor Cornel West, to recount a thorough history of socialism in America. It originally aired at film festivals in October and November of 2020, including the Mill Valley Film Festival in California.

The film narrows in specifically on Stephanie Pierce, a public school teacher in Oklahoma, and former Marine and Virginia State Delegate Lee J. Carter. Pierce became involved in a 2018 school funding strike in Oklahoma, introducing her to the world of politics, where she took an interest in socialism. She eventually became vice president for her teachers union.

The other person of interest, Carter, also identifies as a socialist. His motivation to enter politics came after suffering a work-related injury, after which he was awarded unsatisfactory worker’s compensation. As the film follows him for over a year, the audience sees his dedication as he gets re-elected in 2018.

The film follows socialism from its roots and how it influenced the creation of the Republican Party. Other notable historical events discussed include McCarthyism and the Cold War. Also featured were key historical socialist figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Theodore Roosevelt, and Eugene Debs, as well as modern Democratic Socialists Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

This film explains all the facts for someone who may not be familiar with the concepts of socialism and capitalism. It also has an intriguing narrative told in chronological order, which is important to the audience’s reaction as it will help determine how much they know and how they feel about socialism.

Bridge described creating the film, saying there was a large scope of details they wanted to include. The crew had to narrow down the topics, and it just so happened that Bridge was going to West Virginia when the teacher’s strike occurred in 2018.

“We went out there immediately and just got very lucky with Stephanie,” Bridge said. “We didn’t know where she was going to go politically; that was the hope, as you understand what striking and union work can do, in terms of understanding solidarity and changing your politics. We didn’t know that was going to happen to her, so there were scenes that were just sort of like the film gods smiling at us.”

The film’s premieres at film festivals were pushed back because of the pandemic, allowing Bridge and her crew to go back and add a segment about COVID-19.

“I think the crisis that we’re in sort of lays bare exactly the shortcomings the system has,” Bridge said.

After more festivals and screenings, Bridge plans on doing a theatrical launch around May or June of 2021, which will most likely be virtual.

When prompted to discuss the discourse between socialism and capitalism that was shown in the film, Sawant looked positively at the differences.

“I think debate and disagreement is very important. The left has to have a developer to rekindle the foundations of honest discussion,” Sawant said.

When Feder asked about the film’s audience, Bridge described it as broad.

“When people think the audience for this is small, I think they’re limiting themselves of who is actually available for this information. We tried really hard to make it as digestible as possible,” Bridge said. “It’s not about individual people.”

An audience member posed the question of how to get people who disagree with the film’s message to watch it. Bridge encouraged them to tell their friends to see the film, saying she is looking forward to community outreach through local screenings.

As one final question, Feder asked Bridge and Sawant what gives them hope during these challenging times.

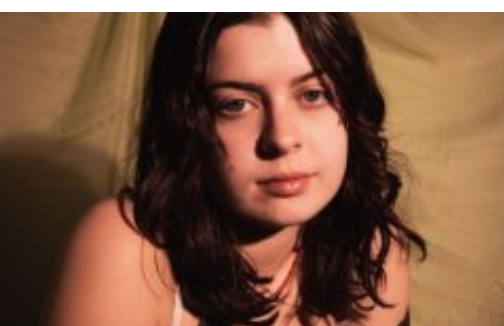
“Looking small, looking at my community has given me hope,” Bridge said. She specifically pointed out how her daughter has been a center of hope as well at a time where she can’t be with other family.

“Fundamentally, what should give us hope is that we are in genuinely a new period of consciousness of the masses, not just across America but worldwide,” Sawant said. “A whole new generation is awakening [to] the failures of the system, and not everything is going to be automatic.”

Tickets were free for the virtual screening and were available Feb. 3 at 12 p.m. through Bright Lights’ website, where the trailer can also be viewed.

Suggest a Correction

Leave a Comment



Karissa Schaefer, Staff Writer, Living Arts

Karissa Schaefer (She/Her) is a senior journalism major from Long Island, NY, who is also minoring in psychology and publishing. This is her sixth semester writing for The Beacon, and she previously served as the Living Arts editor and ELA Bureau Chief. When she’s not writing, you can find her (slaying) binge watching a TV show and drinking a Schweppes ginger ale.