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# A BREAD FACTORY

— Parts One and Two —

By Patrick Wang

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## A BREAD FACTORY: PARTS ONE AND TWO

242 min // USA // 2018

This is the story of The Bread Factory, a community arts center in the small town of Checkford, told in two films.

### Part One: For the Sake of Gold

After 40 years of running The Bread Factory, Dorothea and Greta are suddenly fighting for survival when a celebrity couple—performance artists from China—come to Checkford and build an enormous complex down the street catapulting big changes in their small town.

### Part Two: Walk With Me a While

At The Bread Factory, they rehearse the Greek play, Hecuba. But the real theatrics are outside the theater where the town has been invaded by bizarre tourists and mysterious tech start-up workers. There is a new normal in Checkford, if it is even really Checkford any longer.



## Surviving an Age of Crumbs—Patrick Wang’s “A Bread Factory”

An ambitious two-part film by independent director Patrick Wang delves into the drama of running a community art center in upstate New York.

By Leonardo Goi

*The following is an excerpt from a review originally published in MUBI’s Notebook*

“The kids need a future,” a city council member tells Dorothea (Tyne Daly) half way through the first of Patrick Wang’s two-part *A Bread Factory*: “they need to learn about the world.” Forty years prior to the exchange, Dorothea and her partner Greta (Elizabeth Henry-Macari) bought a bakery in the fictional upstate New York town of Checkford, and turned it into the Bread Factory, an arts center the married couple has fought hard to keep afloat through the years. Cash and funds have

historically been finite and resources volatile—but while stage director Dorothea and actress Greta powered through the decades with indomitable determination and grit, the creation of a bigger arts institute in the opposite side of town, led by a couple of world-renowned Chinese performance artists, May Ray (Janet Hsieh and George Young), is poised to spell the end of the Factory’s illustrious work. The center runs on educational subsidies the town now wants to pump into the glitzier, more

fashionable newcomers' institute—a move that underscores the possibility that the Factory may have ceased to fulfill its educational functions.

Following up on *In the Family* (2011) and *The Grief of Others* (2015), writer-director Patrick Wang's latest feature—I use the word in the singular even though *A Bread Factory's* two parts, "For the Sake of Gold" and "Walk with me a While," stand alone as perfectly independent two-hour films—is a riveting, one of a kind cinematic experience, an ethnography of a community told with a profoundly compassionate eye that speaks to Frederick Wiseman's *Ex Libris: The New York Public Library* (both in its documentary vibe and its ode to a pedagogical institution somewhat at odds with a hyper-digitalized world) and Robert Altman's *A Prairie Home Companion* (of which it echoes the painfully melancholic and tragic elegy to a long gone era—and a long gone audience).

Of all the questions *A Bread Factory* raises—from the present-day relevance of community art spaces to artists-propelled gentrification, from the volatility of public funding for the arts to the David vs. Goliath struggle between independent arts center and giant corporate-backed art institutes—it is the Factory's pedagogical service to the youth that strikes me as possibly the single most interesting component of Wang's project.

The Bread Factory is perfectly equipped to teach Checkford's kids about the world—in fact, it can do a far better job than *May Ray* could ever hope to. The shows and artwork the Factory promotes do not promise short term thrills or a tangible reward, but a more arduous and far more fulfilling experience, one that engages with the brain instead of numbing it under the false pretense of conceptual art reduced to prêt-à-porter statements. "Everyone cries when they make movies," Jordan warns a class of primary school kids during their first lesson in filmmaking, and the most important thing is the passion you put into it: "next time you pick up a camera, care about it." It's a message diametrically opposed to the alleged engagement *May Ray* never truly establish with their audience—a dialogue between artists and public that fails to take off even during Q&As, themselves frustratingly hermetic performances where the two artists blast prerecorded applause and cheers to silence the audience's tepid responses, mouthing inaudible words in lieu of answers.

Making art presupposes pain and self-discipline, just like understanding it requires a conscious effort

to embrace the inconvenient truth that its message may hardly ever be parceled out in the shape of easily digestible snippets of wisdom or Instagram-friendly one-liners. It's a lesson that resonates in Dorothea and Greta's acting coaching, at once rigorous and compassionate, as when they train newcomer Teresa, or when Dorothea hands a script to heartbroken Max and invites him to read on stage, with a nonchalant "things look different from here," two among several other moments of ineffable wonder during which Wang manages to capture the mystical sense of escapism that comes with embracing one's character, and the therapeutic qualities the transformation can offer.

If *A Bread Factory's* first part follows Dorothea and Greta's efforts to fight against a hipstery, pretentious new neighbor, the villain anchoring the second part is a far more elusive beast. With *May Ray* momentarily out of the picture and the school funding secured (at least for the time being), the two women can finally generate buzz for their new production, Euripides' *Hecuba*, in hopes to strike a full house for the premiere. But securing an audience turns out to be just as heart-breaking and difficult a feat as securing the town's funding, and when the curtain draws on a near empty theatre, the defeated look Dorothea wears begs a fundamental, if unspoken question: what's the point in fighting for a cause people do not actually seem to care about?

The disorienting feeling of loss runs parallel to an exhilarating explosion of theatrics outside the stage. A local bar becomes a hotspot for mysterious tech workers (an appendix to the gentrifying artists) with a passion for tap dancing and a tendency to perform while flicking through their smartphones (one chap in particular shows off his footwork while swiping on his screen, the routine alternatively furious and excited depending on the direction of the swipe, in what one can only assume is some form of tap-Tinder); a quartet of real estate agent brokers turns into a Greek choir chanting to cajole Dorothea into selling her barn, retiring, and enjoying her last years globetrotting with Greta.

Director of Photography Frank Barrera films in Super 16mm, a choice that helps strengthening contrasts and saturation, but also symbolically echoes Dorothea's anxiety vis-à-vis a world that seems to have lost interest in traditional means of representation, and a community for whom the Factory, once a rite of passage (everyone in Checkford ends up starring

in one of Dorothea's plays, we are told)  
has ceased to have much meaning.

A Bread Factory is a film of quiet pleasures; it does not unfurl as a rigidly structured three-act plot, but a tapestry of memorable vignettes, gags, conversations, and heart-to-hearts. Its strength does not reside on action-packed story—though things certainly do happen, and drama abounds, if one cares to listen—but in the immersive quality of Wang's filmmaking, and his effortless ability to capture everyday life down to its simplest, most natural facets. It zeroes in on a small community and an even tinier arts center, but it understands both so well that its scope far exceeds the confines of a fictional city in upstate New York, and by the time Dorothea and Greta "walk together for a while," the whole town trailing behind them in a Fellini-like coda, the feeling is to bid farewell to old-time friends after a long overdue catch up. A Bread Factory may open up more questions than it provides answers (What happened to Jan? Will the Factory survive? Will Dorothea and Greta finally give up?), and that's precisely what makes it cinema at its most humanist peaks. After all, to borrow from Jordan's rant after a failed Q&A, "if you have a soul, you have questions to ask."

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