

P.J. PALMER

Grapes Dry on the Vine in California, 2013
single frame 1:85:1, digital capture



courtesy: National Steinbeck Center and (twenty)2 films

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Grapes of Wrath: An American Journey

When a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed.

—John Steinbeck

In the seventy-five years since John Steinbeck chronicled the desperate westward exodus of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the landscape they traveled has changed dramatically. The storied asphalt of Route 66 is but a faded ribbon awash in desert sand, superseded by the gleaming expanse of Interstate 40 through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The national landscape of 2014, too, is a far cry from the world of 1939, when Viking Press published Steinbeck's novel, which became one of the most controversial and important works in American literature and social activism.

As Steinbeck's fictional Joad family turns seventy-five, his wake-up call is as relevant now as it was when he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* during the Great Depression. America is still faced with the same gnawing questions Steinbeck asked: What happens when we don't take care of the less fortunate, the poor, the unemployed, the hungry, the ill, the elderly, the children? Who are we as a people—as a society? What is the meaning of home, family, community? How wide should the gap be between the wealthy minority and the poor majority? What is the role of our government? Can "We The People" do anything to get this right?

To commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*—and to answer some of those questions—the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas asked me to document on film the journey of the Joad family from Sallisaw, Oklahoma, to the Weedpatch migrant camp in Arvin, California. Our goal was to explore what has changed in America since the publication of *The Grapes Of Wrath* and more importantly, what has not: to explore the legacy of Steinbeck's story, its meaning, the issues it explores, and why it remains relevant today.

As artists we always strive to do better and challenge ourselves creatively. By tackling these themes, I am taking my art to a new level of political and social self-reflection. While I have always been drawn to work that highlights the similarities between people, this piece challenges me to explore those things which can cause great division and hostility among individuals. This is a personal project for me as a Californian and as an American. It challenges me to draw from my own experiences of poverty as a child and being sustained by welfare programs for children, and how that social safety net had a profound affect on my life. This entire project is a huge responsibility and an honor. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a giant of American culture and literature, and the task of reexamining this novel and Steinbeck's legacy, especially in today's social climate, will push me to new limits.

P.J. Palmer was raised in the rural mountains of Northern California before moving to Los Angeles at age 21 to pursue a career in motion pictures. He landed his first job in production at Warner Brothers Studios on the NBC show "ER", which he remained with for years learning filmmaking first hand. He has since has worked on dozens of award winning projects as a director, producer and writer. He is a 2013 Edinburgh Film Festival Talent Lab alumni and a 2014 artist-in-residence with The National Steinbeck Center. Notable projects include his work as Series Producer on the New York based LGBT web-series *Anyone But Me* and his work as co-director and producer on the documentary, *American Red Cross: Katrina Relief*. Palmer recently acquired the documentary film rights to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and is now in production directing the feature length documentary *The Grapes of Wrath: We Shall Overcome* featuring James Franco and Lois Smith. P.J. resides in Santa Monica, California with an insane orange cat.