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April 20, 2006

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'Crossing' a fine documentary

Phil Villarreal, ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Film gives voice to all sides, including the immigrants

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Illegal immigration is a problem that can't be ignored, and neither can

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"**Crossing** Arizona," a penetrating, in-depth film on the ugly issue.

Documentarian Joseph Mathew, 40, who also made "The Last Season: The Life and Demolition of Baltimore's Memorial Stadium" (2002), boldly and daringly searches out all corners of the immigration debate. In looking for answers, Mathew cites the weak Mexican economy, exploitative U.S. employers and fat-cat consumers who profit, often unknowingly, off the slave labor.

The film's most bombastic, and not entirely fair, accusation is that America's Border Patrol is responsible for the surge in deaths of the illegal crossers. With the most safe and popular **crossing** routes sealed off, illegal immigrants had to take their chances in the unforgiving open desert, with no roads or food. The film says there have been more than 1,000 verified border-**crossing** deaths since 1995.

Mathew's film is sympathetic to the illegal immigrants' plight, but it also displays a willingness to hear all sides of the fracas.

Mathew, who was born in India and came to the United States in 1994, gets a farmer who thrives off hiring illegal immigrants as a labor force to speak on camera. He pins down mercenary coyotes for some straight talk. He talks to ranchers who cringe as their property is trashed and damaged by those passing through. He crouches in the hills with Border Patrol agents, and on roadsides with vigilante groups opposed to the border crossers, as well as Samaritans who provide food and water.

Most important, he talks to the immigrants themselves. One illegal crosser paid his meager life savings to a coyote, only to end up separated from the pack and stranded on the side of the road. He needs to earn enough money for his wife's operation, but is helpless without food, water or direction and must resign himself to walking down a lonely road, hoping a Border Patrol agent passes by and gives him a ride back to Mexico.

"**Crossing** Arizona" is an enlightening, full-spectrum deconstruction of the immigration matter, and could easily be adapted into a feature film in the vein of "Traffic" or "Syriana."

The documentary is set against the backdrop of the 2004 effort to pass Arizona's Prop. 200, which requires voters to prove citizenship to register to vote, show photo identification at the polls and prove eligibility to receive welfare. Opponents of the proposition saw the concept as racially charged. Mathew follows two women going door-to-door and attempting to rally people to vote against the proposition. One comments that she's sure it will be mainly Hispanics who are asked to show their IDs at the polls, subtly likening the proposition to a Jim Crow law. The proposition passed, thanks to overwhelming support in Phoenix.

It's no surprise that this sterling effort of visual journalism was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize for best documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival. The shock is that there was a film ("God Grew Tired of Us," directed by Christopher Quinn) strong enough to beat it.

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Review

**Crossing** Arizona

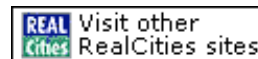
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Rated: Not rated

Director: Joseph Mathew

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Family call: It's fine for families.

Running time: 97 minutes

Et cetera: In English and Spanish, with English subtitles

Playing at: The Arizona International Film Festival. The film screens at 7:30 p.m. Friday at the Loft as part of the festival's opening night event; 2 p.m. Saturday at Crossroads; and 5 p.m. Wednesday at the Screening Room. For ticket, venue and schedule information for the festival, visit [www.azmac.org/festival/index.htm](http://www.azmac.org/festival/index.htm) online.

Contact reporter Phil Villarreal at 573-4130 or [pwillarreal@azstarnet.com](mailto:pwillarreal@azstarnet.com).

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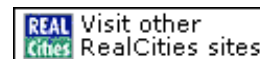
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