Alycia Debnam-Carey and Betsy Brandt Talk 'Saint X,' Privilege, and Bias

The actors discuss the Hulu series' adaptation of the best-selling novel and the complexity of racial bias.

BY MADELEINE DELIEE PUBLISHED: APR 27, 2023



HULU

Saint X isn't a real place; it's an island created in the imagination of author Alexis Schaitkin and brought to life on-screen in the current Hulu limited series adaptation. The production was shot on location in the Dominican Republic, and the setting itself is fully as vital and developed as another character in the plot. The fictional Saint X was inspired by elements of many locations: the lush vegetation of one, the distinctive syntax of another, and clearly the tragic impact of a tourist death and the resulting media circus.

The last, of course, is reminiscent of Natalee Holloway's disappearance during her vacation in Aruba in May 2005. A blonde, white American 18-year-old girl vanished on a high school senior trip, and the press went berserk, spinning headlines that went on for months. For a country as dependent on tourism as Aruba, particularly American tourism, the negative publicity was devastating, by some estimates dropping tourist revenues as much as 15 percent. The effects were profound and, locals felt, unfair, impacting livelihoods and lives for years, despite the fact that — unlike in *Saint X* — there were never charges filed locally against anyone, Aruban or otherwise, and the only serious persons of interest were foreign nationals. The case is still unsolved.

In the fictional world it inspired, however, the overlapping perspectives of the similar tragedies explore related, still-painful questions: How does a family deal with loss? What does true justice mean, and how is it decided? What responsibilities do outsiders have when visiting another culture? Alycia Debnam-Carey and Betsy Brandt, who star in Hulu's screen version, talked with Shondaland about how these ideas shaped their own performances and the story overall.

View full post on Youtube

Brandt, who plays Mia, mother of the ostensible victim, Alison, sees bias as a driving force in the narrative. "Sometimes we're not even aware of the biases we have, or how we look at things and what we're seeing and what

we're not seeing," she says. While she identified deeply with her character and the pain of her loss, she was also fascinated by her blind spots. "A lot of the other stuff, some of it she's aware of, some of it she's not, but I love playing that too," she says. "They're just like, well, that's how everybody lives, because everyone around them is like them. And then, I think, and I don't judge them for this, when they lose their daughter, it's ... just about that visceral loss. And that also gives a moment to see how they really feel; sometimes how they really feel is not pretty."

Those not-so-pretty feelings drive the story, a sharp contrast between the beautiful natural surroundings and the ugliness of grief, loss, and inequality. Debnam-Carey, who plays Alison's sister Emily, thinks the complicated roots also need to be addressed, looking at how that mentality extends. "There's so much in this, but I don't think it's attacked so often on-screen. Hard topics, you know, are tricky but important, obviously," she says. She cites her character's choice to reside in a Caribbean neighborhood, contributing to its gentrification. "[She's] completely naive to the fact that she's this white woman going into these sort of Caribbean spaces and putting herself in a situation that [she] has no concept of how this would make other people feel. It has a lot of white privilege, and I thought it was a really interesting aspect to explore, for sure," she says.

Both actors emphasize the creative team's efforts to address such sensitive matters thoughtfully in the show. Debnam-Carey notes the "care and responsibility taken" to support "trust with the creatives, the showrunner, and the director, [creating] open dialogue and ... communication, just making sure that it felt safe." Even so, Brandt acknowledges the truths presented by the location itself, challenging their prior thinking and highlighting the differences between the world they inhabited during production and the one they typically experience. "There's a lot of beauty and amazing things to see in the Dominican Republic," she says. "And there are a lot of things that they are without that you don't think about until you're living in it. And then I come back home, and I have all the things I have, and … yeah, I solved no problems."

View full post on Instagram

Brandt describes her character, Mia, as someone who sees and experiences the island "like Disneyland"; her comment reflects the disconnected perception that exists from their arrival: in the world, but definitely not of the world. Brandt points to a scene in which Mia attempts empathy for the island's residents. "I'm like, 'Oh, sorry that you have to rebuild your island every year. What a refreshing drink!'" she says. "She came for vacation." Even before their time on Saint X goes horribly off track, the divide between temporary and permanent inhabitants is painfully clear. As Debnam-Carey elaborates, "There's so many racial elements that come into play, and injustice and bias, and even the deeper roots of colonialism that come from a resort-style atmosphere," all of which are heightened by economic interdependence.

This also had parallels to the production experience. Brandt says that the cast and crew became close, and that she struggled with some local

norms, like optional schooling. “I don’t say that they should have a life that looks like my life,” she says. “That’s more about me than, you know, it is about what anyone else needs to do. But I think it felt sometimes even further than it was. And it’s far. But … I did grapple with that. Like we’re all humans, and there is oneness to us, but it felt in some ways — like some of the things we’re worried about and [the things] people who live in the D.R. are worried about — they’re worlds apart. I feel like there should be a really easy answer, and there’s not.”

Like its real-life counterpart in the Holloway case, the reasons and their effects are complex and plentiful. There aren’t easy answers. But work like *Saint X*, which holds a mirror to that complexity and insists on, if not trying to untangle it, then at least looking at it squarely and unflinchingly, helps to move the needle. If the answers aren’t there, it starts by at least asking the questions.

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, *and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.*

Get Shondaland directly in your inbox: SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Watch Next



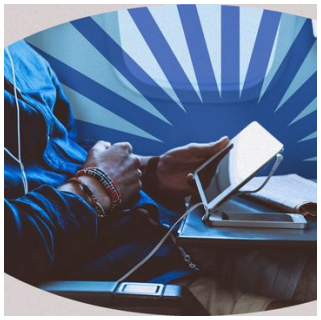
the screen & the arts



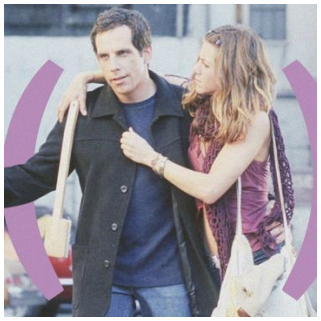
Lindsay Mendez on Motherhood, Friendship, and More



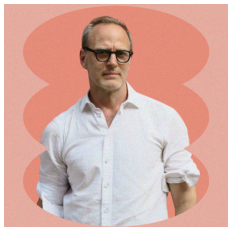
40 Years of the ‘Footloose’ Soundtrack



I Love Watching Movies on Airplanes



20 Years of 'Along Came Polly'



How Tom Broecker Changed Up 'Mean Girls'



What's With All the Reboots?



How Dan Levy Found Catharsis Making 'Good Grief'



All the Movies to See for Awards Season 2024



Henry Louis Gates Jr. Talks Finding His Roots



Your January 2024 TV Preview



10 Years of 'The Wolf of Wall Street'



12 Facts You Never Knew About 'Mona Lisa Smile'

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

We may earn commission from links on this page, but we only recommend products we back.