"It begins as a Godardian abstraction of a Bourne thriller; but when this story submerges, Paradise comes into being: a deconstruction of the messianic, sugarcoated Matrix fantasy. Characters become authors who create characters who become authors: a Hoffmannesque nesting of consciousnesses begins. Solange, a novelist, dreams her family into the future, conjures her characters into the present, and leaves them haunted by an unremembered past. She renames her children Jules and Juliet, makes them lovers, siblings who like to pretend that they are pretending to be sister and brother, and who keep love and memory alive by impersonating each other. Her husband, Roman, haunted by a chill presiment of that first, malevolent thriller, finds himself receding into the infinity of other lives, as if there were no death, only dissolving. And when the thriller resurfaces, it is Juliet, Solange's conjured daughter, who returns, filled with the horrible dream of a suicide bomber—hands on the plunger, she walks into a café where she and her brother, still just children, sit. But she, too, dissolves away beyond death and rebirth, into an endless roiling cloud of being and becoming."

—Duane Dell'Amico
I wrote a new scenario, Atlas, which I worked on for some time. I put a casting notice in Backstage in New York and received over five hundred submissions. I narrowed this down to some eighty people whom I interviewed and had read. There were many good actors from all over the world with very diverse kinds of training. I got down to a small group, and as I read them and had them read to me, soon enough I realized again I could not pull off a film that required very specific locations, controlled environments, permits, demanding days with actors and crew.

Against this limit, I decided to set up the film scenario as an acting or theater group that goes to the park to rehearse and put on a show. This way I could easily fold the fiction into the real of the park and its environs. I would be documenting the group in this setting. In this context of the troupe discussing the staging of this fiction and the real, they began to enact a fiction, which of course bleeds into the real both in terms of their surroundings and themselves putting on the show and the enactment of the text of their fiction. In this way there was no outside the text, outside the film, outside the fiction. It was a fiction inside a documentary.

This way we would not have to control the background. Everything was and could be part of the film.

As a location the park could be used for many things: at times depicted as something utopic and public, at others something untamed and unruly, or then landscaped and orderly, and in some places, behind a fence or large plastic sheet we had, we could depict what was called the Wonka Camp, a place of human confinement. We would use available light and Prospect Park, with its great diversity of landscapes, from rolling meadows to wooded areas to tropical streams and jungle-like groves, all this would let us move from location to location while being in the same place, Prospect Park. All this was well, except for our last shooting day in early October. It was already fall weather and though fortunately we had great sunlight, the cold and fall clothing throws us off that midsummer night’s feeling we had going in much of the film shoot. As much as I wanted to, I could not work around this, so it seems at times in the finished film we see the same group in the heat of summer and then the brisk cool of fall. Continuity is certainly one of the biggest issues that film shoots must control. Continuity of light, place, actor, time, performance, it must all be uniform and consistent, all these ways to suspend disbelief for the audience—and all this requires enormous infrastructure.

The film was finished and titled Paradise. Through the work I felt very close with the actors and continually adapted the scenario to them and our situation.
Notes on the Process

I want to set out to fold fiction with fact, to use the everyday, everything that is in front of us, that we don't have to move out of our way. Within this I want to convince us of the invented, to know that imagination becomes reality, that our inner and outer selves can be the fragments that can become stories that become behavior, suggestions, whispers, hauntings, a narrative.

The process sets out to find new ways to record and observe, to invent character and behavior, to create an emergent narrative in the distributed space of both personal and collective recording.

It’s an interweaving set of stories, both fiction and real, drawing on exercises, instructions, a script, snippets of books and writings produced by multiple authors with a core group of actors and their “private lives,” “private moments,” “friends,” “families,” and others—mixed in with invention, and of course within the frame of photography and editing, that which sets off the fiction and creates it.

The work reflects the new modes of personal recording, personal revelation.

These are the notes I gave the actors, drawing them together with me to continually adapt the text, our fiction, our story, to who, where, and what we could do within the limits we had. Just like adapting the story to varied possible locations, I would adapt the characters and scenarios to the actors I found and to who they were. In this sense, like the fiction of an acting troupe putting on a play that was our film script, the living actors creating a fiction became extraordinarily collaborative in making these films, each of us adapting to each other and creatively inventing something specific and particular to what we could do. Within limits there are always possibilities.

To represent the body of desire, of beauty, of being, of love, of becoming. The world of linguistics and order and law and logic becomes for a brief moment something else, a certain play.
... the boy and girl, lying together in the grass, sharing grapes and grape lollipops, the presumed original and imitation sharing equal privilege of taste, neither a derivative of the other, each going with the other as well as with tongues and tastes. Bodies move on and over each other. Emotions, too—or, better, affects, as emotions are too human, too familiar; affects are indifferent to humanity, exceed humanity: affects move in, out, in, over each other....

“This is paradise (and Paradise), where all the world’s a (sound-) stage, where there is not first a world and then what we do in it, what we do to it. Paradise is the temporal ooze within humanity, a way of going with the world, not in the world. (This is not to say that paradise is being one with the world; I’m saying it’s being many with the world, many ways of going, many desires and speeds and rhythms and consistencies and shapes all commingling. Lafia gives us a paradise that supersedes God and Darwin by offering creative evolution—a Bergsonian paradise, all differentiated becoming.)”

—Daniel Coffeen

Peter Duhon
I really enjoyed that scene. Your characters are extremely complex in a good way. They are happy, they are sad, they are lost, but they are also experiencing what we call the free will of negativity. I noticed that, for example, in the hide-and-seek scene, and it plays out through the entire film. Your characters are losing something but at the same time gaining something else from that loss in return.

Marc Lafia
Salman Rushdie, whom I love very much—his writing and thinking—is always talking about how we leak into one another to the point that we each become the other. We set up certain boundaries, which are often self-imposed. But these boundaries, from a psycho-cosmic, psychedelic, or Buddhist point of view, are very artificial. I created this membrane in the script and called it the “Wonka camp,” a place where the characters are captured.

At some point in the narrative I position the actors inside this membrane, and they are all forced to bridge boundaries—psychic boundaries, political boundaries, their own personal boundaries, boundaries in terms of language, and so on.
Peter Duhon
There is a strong coherent use of metaphors in your film. What are your sources and inspirations? You tend to use traditional and classic metaphors, but also you create some of your own and, at the same time, encourage us to create our own ones too. What is the process you are going through in order to achieve that?

Marc Lafia
When making this film, the park set a limit for us. We had only a certain amount of time to shoot, so the demand of time and the given circumstance forced us all to come to decisions. I always find that this is the best way to work—to be up against a limit. So the process is going through the thing, having to be logistic, realistic, centered, bounded, to think through how to distribute the event of narrative in space.

At the same time, I tend to surprise actors. I found out that if I gave them glasses, swimming caps, some accessories that are strange to them, they became even more inventive. When you create a space for them of trust and appreciation, things really happen.

“How do we find this paradise? How do we become? Well, it is certainly not by following the same old rules of containment. We need to begin from somewhere else entirely, where we can jettison the assumptions of identity, of cause and effect, of linear time. We need a new grammar—of film, yes, but perhaps also of life—that will allow, facilitate, and amplify becoming.”

—Daniel Coffeen