

# ***Adjunct* (2024): Contingent Academic Worker Endures Dehumanization, Desperation and Indignity in a Hilariously Impossible Quest for a Tenure Track Dream Job.**

**Review by Katherine Arnoldi**

*Adjunct* (2024), deftly directed, written and starring Ron Najor hits almost every note, both high and low, in the expendable, beleaguered life of an adjunct professor, but falls short of long term answers for the half a million adjuncts working in the United States. This is not *On the Waterfront*, *Norma Rae* or *Matewan* but instead focuses on the hilariously tragic life of one adjunct, Amer, who clings to the impossible dream of a tenure track academic job.

We first see Amer (Ron Najor) facing the camera, making a video presumably soon to be used to make his English teaching job obsolete, discussing “writing what you know,” which is precisely what Najor, an ex-adjunct in real life, does in this film. The young student videographer tells Amer he is finished, never looking up from her phone, prompting Amer to compliment her for multi-tasking. She smirks a disgusted “you are such a loser,” which is just the beginning of the escalating indignities Amer will face. Next, we see the definition of adjunct: a thing added to something else as supplemental, not an essential part.

True, indeed. According to a Cengage blog (2024) seventy percent of faculty are adjuncts who make an average of \$3,700 for a semester long course and fifty-seven percent have no medical benefits. A student wants Amer to stay after class for consultation, and, when Amer says he cannot, the student asks who his supervisor is. Amer will clearly be reported. But Amer cannot stay after because, in the car which we understand is also his home, he replaces the college parking sticker for the UBER sign as he heads out to his next job. Later, we will see him at the cash register as a night clerk in a liquor store.

Working on a novel which his family assumes will be an Oprah hit, Amer is also in the running for a full time tenure track job at the college where he works, while a fellow adjunct in the windowless office is so desperate to advance, he takes a trial lecture position at UCLA for no pay.

Najor hits note after note in the dehumanization of the adjunct. His boss, Tom (Ross Turner), who has a \$50,000 Tesla in the driveway of his swanky suburban home asks Amer to judge the creative writing contest for the department for, surprise, no extra pay. Amer tries to make a doctor appointment for treatment for an infected ear and the doctor, looking at his insurance, says he cannot see him for six to eight months. Meanwhile, there is nowhere to have sex with his girlfriend, Layla (Nikohl Boosheri) but in his car. After, she admonishes him for being cheap.

“I’m not cheap. I’m broke,” Amer says, but the girlfriend is already long gone.

Amer is summoned to his supervisor’s office, because the student did file a complaint, which, the supervisor says, will be added to his permanent file. The snarky head of the department, Tom, offers Amer a class that is not “official” and so he will not qualify for insurance next semester. But, despite all this dehumanization, Amer is human, he is, really, and, in a moment, at a family wedding with another adjunct, Kristen (Kristen Erickson), Amer and the woman dance in what may be the sexiest dancing scene in a film ever (Sorry John Travolta and Patrick Swayze) and he is all hopeful for love until the new girlfriend moves to Arizona for a real job in journalism.

The high notes, helping and mentoring students whose lives are forever changed, writing the recommendation for the student who gets the job, an apology from a student whose friends humiliated him in the UBER are there, but an entire symphony of adjunct notes are missing. Missing are the adjunct offices that are not only windowless, but without ventilation because it was intended as a supply room where fifteen adjuncts, shoulder to shoulder, try to have “conferences” with students amid the distracting roar of conversations while the full time faculty’s spacious offices with floor to ceiling windows looking over the river and the skyline are never, ever occupied because, well, the full time faculty are never on campus. There are the hours of unpaid “training” sessions where full time faculty who clearly know nothing about teaching drone on and on about the time their mother left them in the car, holding back tears that break into sobs. What does this have to do with teaching we eye each other, but, we know, it is just another injustice to be endured along with the more likely than not abusive “observations” by same full time faculty. Worse is the constant semester anxiety as adjuncts wait, sometimes until the last minute, to find out whether or not they have classes. Missing, too, according to Dinno in “How Administrative Bloat is Killing Higher Education,” is any mention in *Adjunct* of the horrendously exorbitant high salaries of the various dubious administration departments, who make their realms bigger and bigger, holding the budget hostage from the students and any future solvency for the college, which, like so many permanent closure announcements recently, will go under like the sinking ship it is.

I should know all this. I am an adjunct still working at 74 because, well, I have to, but what about Amer? Oh, the stories adjuncts could tell and I am happy that Najor told his here so hilariously and with such powerful, logical coherency as each scene builds, following the through line of his obvious impending demise. What will Amer do in the face of constant humiliation and degradation? Will he continue to be dehumanized without the prospect of a home, love, family or any semblance of safety, dignity and, even less, the pursuit of happiness? What will be his bottom? I hope you will watch this magnificent film to find out what happens to Amer and then contemplate what might be a real solution for the half a million adjunct laborers.

*Adjunct*. Directed by Ron Najor, Atlas Brave, 2024.

#### **Author Bio:**

**Katherine Arnoldi**, Ph.D., is the author of the graphic novel *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (Hyperion, 1998) which was named a Top Ten Book of the Year by *Entertainment Weekly*, and *All Things Are Labor, Stories* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), which won

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