

PortlandTribune

Snow jobs aplenty blown out by film

Movie's simple query reveals machinations of Bush administration

BY NICK BUDNICK

Pamplin Media Group, Jun 12, 2008

COURTESY OF TODD DARLING

Wyoming rancher George Smith vents his frustration about methane extraction in Todd Darling's new film, "A Snow Mobile for George."

In "A Snow Mobile for George," filmmaker Todd Darling opens with a swirling panorama from a boat floating down the Klamath River, and asks:

"How did I end up here floating backwards down a river, 20 miles from a road, and even further from electricity? It all began in a cabin in California with a mystery about a machine, and it ended on the other side of America, with a letter."

To connect these dots, Darling straps his family snowmobile onto a trailer, hops in a Jeep Cherokee and drives across the country to put human faces on environmental issues, ranging from the Klamath water wars to the toxic aftermath of 9-11.

The result: an eye-catching and provocative film that will make environmentalists smile, conservatives cringe and fans of Michael Moore chuckle. The film also sheds an opinionated light on the sophisticated electoral calculus behind many of today's headlines.

Queries became conversations

Darling starts out with a simple question: Why did the administration of George W. Bush halt a phaseout of two-stroke engines in snowmobiles and other recreational vehicles?

To answer the question, Darling begins with a broad focus, turning his film into a countrywide look at deregulation and the clash between politics and science.

For Oregonians, the beginning of the movie is familiar territory, but with a view that was largely absent from the mainstream media's coverage of the Klamath water controversy of 2001.

Darling's interviews with Yurok fishermen who were on the short end of the Bush administration's pro-farmer policies are combined with dramatic footage of dead fish in the Klamath River. He also interviews the Los Angeles Times reporters who broke the story of how Bush's political adviser Karl Rove influenced federal policy on the Klamath in ways specifically designed to turn out Republican voters in Oregon.

Darling then heads to Wyoming to talk to ranchers who have lost their peace, wildlife and water as a consequence of a new sort of gold rush, as oil and gas companies race to extract methane from the plains.

This battle, Darling reveals, pitted political appointees from the U.S. Department of the Interior against the scientists of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – and you probably can guess who lost.

Darling then checks in on the toxic cloud of pulverized concrete, asbestos and chemicals that spread over much of New York City in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

While much has been written about the toxic aftereffects suffered by rescue workers who responded to the tragedy, Darling does an admirable job of clarifying the debate. He focuses on an individual paramedic with cancer, whose story illustrates the deceit of political appointees who rewrote news releases to conceal the extent of environmental hazards – potentially fatal ones.

Darling ends his journey in Washington, D.C., where he revisits the great snowmobile debate and stitches it into a grand quilt of analysis.

His conclusion: Sophisticated Republican political types have figured out how to merge the customer databases of big business with voter rolls. This “voter vault” of information is used to target interested voters, alert them to specific regulatory issues, and then marshal them to swing the vote in key states.

Film cut on the bias

Darling's movie is more low-budget and not quite as intentionally inflammatory as Moore's recent films, such as “Sicko.” But he uses many of the same techniques of simplification and humanization.

There's also a Moore-like use of gimmickry – such as the recurring image of his cattle horn-bedecked family snowmobile that follows him on its trailer from the plains of Wyoming to the streets of Manhattan.

Like Moore, however, Darling's approach leaves himself open to the charge of oversimplification. Not all environmental issues boil down to electoral maneuvering, nor are they all so easily silhouetted into black and white.

Rather, Darling has cherry-picked examples that lend themselves to framing Bush as an ecological villain. More difficult issues, such as lifestyles of consumption and relative excess, as well as population and its effects on the environment, are nowhere to be found.

Nor does Darling let on that Republicans are hardly unique in their urge to deregulate: The Clinton White House was guilty of similar maneuvers.

Darling puts on scant pretense of being an objective commentator. But whatever your political leanings, this movie does a fine job of tracing how political battles and esoteric bureaucratic decisions can leave a human trail of pain, and even death, in their wake.

'A Snow Mobile for George'

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, June 13, also showing June 14, 15, 21 and 22.

Where: Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd., 503-281-4215

More: Filmmaker Todd Darling will be available for after-screening questions opening night. www.hollywoodtheatre.org www.asnowmobileforgeorge.com

To see a trailer, go [here](#).

Copyright 2008 Pamplin Media Group, 6605 S.E. Lake Road, Portland, OR 97222 • 503-226-6397