

Film Close-Up: Michael Moore

by Joey_Berlin

Rabble-rousing filmmaker Michael Moore is back grabbing headlines with "Sicko," his investigation of America's health care system. What makes Moore's movies stand apart from ordinary documentaries is his guerrilla filmmaking technique and his shaggy-dog style.

MICHAEL MOORE - Michael Moore dissects America's health care system in his new documentary 'Sicko.' CNS Photo courtesy of Weinstein Co.

"Sicko" continues Moore's tradition of barging into hostile corporate territory armed with only a camera and microphone. Moore also can't resist making himself the star of a few scenes of "Sicko," but by now that's a standard part of his method.

A big eye-opener meant to shake up America's health care system, "Sicko" touches on the plight of the uninsured. But the film's primary focus is on the people who play by the rules and pay their premiums, only to get cruelly shot down when profit-worshipping insurance companies will not cover their medical bills.

Michigan-born Moore, 53, won an Academy Award for his documentary, "Bowling for Columbine." His follow-up, "Fahrenheit 9/11," shattered the box office record for documentaries, racking up \$119 million in ticket sales. No matter if you sit on the left side or the right side of the movie theater aisle, Moore always gives you a lot to think about.

Q: What is the story behind the Bush administration going after "Sicko?"

A: About 10 days before the Cannes Film Festival, the Bush administration informed me that I was under investigation for criminal and civil penalties because I took a group of 9/11 rescue workers, who were not receiving health care for injuries incurred at Ground Zero, to Cuba. It's illegal for Americans to travel to Cuba unless you're a journalist. But no laws were broken. This was just another attempt by the Bush administration to use our federal agencies to harass political opponents, in this case, me. My lawyers advised me to make a duplicate master of the film and store it in Canada. The American government could claim that I went to Cuba with blank film that was worth nothing, and then filmed scenes that now had value. And thus, they could potentially confiscate my film.

Q: Were you seriously worried about that?

A: To even have to say these words in a free country, that I was worried they could confiscate my film simply because I want to make my movie, is absurd. But we've learned to deal with a lot of absurd things in the last seven years.

Q: How did this film get its start?

A: I thought I would do something that we did on my old TV show, where we embarrassed an insurance company to pay for a guy's operation that had been denied. I thought that would make a good film if we did 10 cases. But then, we'd only have saved 10 lives. Eighteen thousand Americans die every year because of a lack of health insurance. And God knows how many die with health insurance! So I asked people to send their stories over the Internet. And the majority of the horror stories were from people who had insurance, thinking they were covered. A lot of people think they have insurance, that they are fully covered. But watch what happens when a severe illness happens, watch what that insurance company does to not pay the bill! They cannot make a profit if they pay out for the bills.

Q: In the film, you anonymously pick up the health care costs for a man who runs an anti-Michael Moore Web site. How did that turn out?

A: I called him before the film first screened at Cannes, because I didn't want him blindsided by the press. I left a voice mail message that I sent him the check. He put that message on his site. And he immediately posted a thank-you, and told me he wished the film well. But generally, he's been thankful and grateful to me. Most of the people working on the film thought that would tick him off, but I was the lone dissenter. I thought he would respond well to an act of kindness. And even though we have disagreement, I thought even he should have a right to see a doctor.

Q: Why do some people seem to hate you?

A: Who dislikes me now? If you asked that question in 2003, backstage at the Oscars, that would be a legitimate question. But in 2007, 70 percent of the country agrees with me. I'm actually in the mainstream majority now. And that's a little weird! Four years ago, I was booed off the Oscars for suggesting that we were led to war for false reasons. People remember that in "Fahrenheit 9/11," I showed how soldiers were treated in the Army hospitals, years before the mainstream media. In "Bowling for Columbine," I showed a school shooting, and we just dealt with that again.

Q: "Sicko" is almost being marketed as if it were a comedy. What is your take on that?

A: I consider myself a satirist. Years ago, the op-ed pages of our newspapers contained great satires from Mark Twain and Will Rogers. Back then, humor wasn't divorced from politics and opinion. Like the op-ed page, my films are opinions based on facts. I'm not the leader of a political movement or a preacher. First and foremost, I'm a filmmaker trying to make a film that people will want to see on a Saturday night. If people

have a good laugh or cry, I'm happy.

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