

Hollywood, Etc.: Moral outrage, humor make up Moore's one-two punch

by David_Elliott

The voice crackles from the other end of the phone line, the voice of a lightning rod. The rod is Michael Moore, talking from Denver, and Sunday is not a day of rest for him.

HEALTH CHECKUP - Michael Moore's new documentary 'Sicko,' explores America's health care system. CNS Photo courtesy of Weinstein Co. This is the grinding last push for "Sicko," Moore's documentary lament for our nation's health, uh, "system." As opposed to systems in France, Canada, Great Britain and even Cuba, whose truly national health procedures Moore examines favorably, America's warren of madly erratic coverage is the latest storm center for which big, pushy Moore has opted to be our angry eye. The opening gun of his latest issues film was, as usual, triggered personally:

"I had this TV show called 'The Awful Truth,' and we had a segment about a guy whose HMO wouldn't approve payment for his operation," says Moore. After a mock funeral for the man was staged in front of the insurer's office, the HMO agreed to pay. "That was sort of the start of this. I thought: What about all the others? About 18,000 people a year who die in this country from such decisions and denials?"

Moore's movies often show a lot of Moore and a lot of politics. He chortles about diddling those expectations with "Sicko," in which he appears late and remains low-key. Humor is how he peppers the salt of tough realities.

"At the beginning," he notes, "I have fun with those things. In the early seconds, we get Bush and people think: 'Oh yeah, here comes another two hours against Bush from Michael Moore.' Then we don't see him again for another hour. And I make them think early it's going to be about poor people, but it's really about the middle-class getting the shaft."

At 53, Moore is a gadfly institution who still seems the breezy sparker out of Flint, Mich. If you call him a polarizing figure, this draws a genial rebuke, honed from countless encounters:

"I haven't become a polarizing figure! The right-wing conservative media have created a fictional character called Michael Moore. They invented him as a stock demon. If they really told the truth about who I am, it would shock their listeners, who have been told so many lies about me.

"Look, I told the truth about GM (in 'Roger and Me'), and now they're going broke. I told the truth about guns (in 'Bowling for Columbine'), and not long ago we had another terrible gun disaster. I said (in 'Fahrenheit 9/11') Bush was lying to us about Iraq, and got booed at the Oscars for it. But now, thousands of dead later, most of the country has come around.

"The right wing always needs its devil figure, whether it's blacks or Jews or terrorists, or Michael Moore."

So who is he?

"If they were to portray me accurately, I am a guy who went to seminary to become a Catholic priest. And I still go to church on Sundays. I am an Eagle Scout. My dad fought in World War II. I have been married to the same woman for 29 years. And I wouldn't use a credit card till I was 35 because it didn't seem like real money to me."

The main string on Moore's protest lute is moral outrage, in the key of the old Latin phrase quoted in Chaucer: *Radix malorum est cupiditas* (the root of evil is greed). This strums his soul:

"It is not just the greed of the insurance and pharmaceutical companies the film is attacking. It's about the greed in all of us, the every-man-for-himself thinking we have fallen into. Other countries tend to structure their societies on we, not me. Yeah, at the core of all my films is the sense of us needing to care for each other, and not be victims of this absurd greed."

But more specific culprits can be huge fun. "Sicko" has a choice Nixon tape (matched with Oval Office photo) of the late president sounding very excited about corporate medical schemes. Moore revels in his finder's luck:

"Isn't that great? It was a 23-year-old guy in our office who found it, actually. Imagine the delight! Yeah, Dick Nixon is a gift that just keeps on giving."

His favorite bit is more complex - it is "when I hear gasps from the audience. That is when I am talking to a British doctor about what income he makes, and he says he gets a bonus if he gets patients to quit smoking and lower their cholesterol. You feel the entire audience thinking: 'Gee, what a great idea. I love that.' And I always take people to places they'd never otherwise get to."

Such as Cuba, where Moore lands like a very big Jack Sparrow with his tiny, leased flotilla of sick, medically denied 9/11 caregivers. The dream or scheme was to get into our base at Guantanamo, where terror suspects receive more generous (and free) care than the New York heroes get at home. Instead, turned back from Gitmo, they receive free care from Cuban doctors.

Like inflammable gas, this gambit has won major radio and blog abuse from people who lambaste Moore as pro-Castro. He sighs over this, with stoical bemusement:

"Imagine the trouble I would have in Cuba, making movies like I do! I am trouble for anyone in power. Look, if I had gone to China instead, to show Chinese medicine, I wouldn't be getting an ounce of complaint about it, even though China is a far more repressive regime.

"You know why people get so mad about Cuba? Castro beat us. This punk on a little island beat us, and that is still driving Americans crazy."

A little crazily himself, Moore says he thought Gitmo might open up to him and his needy passengers. He waxed hopeful:

"I figured by this time somebody would call my bluff. I thought someone I'd set up would finally say: 'Oh yeah, you're gonna have your joke at our expense? Well, come right on in!' But, hey, it never seems to happen."

As usual, he has the last laugh.

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