

ONSCREEN

The paranoids are restless

BALLOT MEASURE 9



Directed by Heather MacDonald. Doc. June 2-8.
Metropolitan Cinema, College & Euclid, 323-3233.
(See eye's Independent & Repertory listings for times.)

I'm a typical Canadian: reticent, tolerant, phlegmatic. When push comes to shove I'll support individual rights, less government, beer and wine in corner stores. I'd rather study political movements than be involved in them and about the only things that rile me are bad art and dishonesty.

Ballot Measure 9, an engrossing and sometimes chilling documentary about the events surrounding the 1992 campaign for Oregon's anti-gay ballot initiative, "Measure 9," made me fearful of our neighbors to the south. The paranoids are organizing — Bible in one hand, shotgun in the other. It would be funny if it wasn't true.

The shortish documentary (72 minutes), winner of the audience award at the 1995 Sundance film festival, follows

the gay and lesbian fight to keep non-discrimination in the state constitution, and the Oregon's Citizens Alliance hope to amend it back to "a moral base."

For a filmmaker, it's hard to go wrong with such a passionate topic; sparks will fly and there's usually ample opportunity for effective editing. Director Heather MacDonald is never obvious or crass in



Ballot Measure 9

her bias and the issues are examined in an un-inflammatory style. Still, the religious right make it very easy for the viewer to perceive it as totally out of touch and at times, dangerously misinformed.

The majority of *Ballot Measure 9* is depressing. Threats turn into violence and gay activists, fearing for their lives, resort to keeping loaded guns in their houses. There's not much levity in the film, but one exchange at a rally merits a brief mention. A lesbian patiently hears out an elderly man who asks her to forsake her "wicked ways."

"I'm very happy with my life," she says.

He shakes his head and says, "Well, that's your problem."

Ballot Measure 9 is a searing portrait of a nation being torn apart by race, religion and sexual identity.

— CAROLYN BENNETT

NOW

NOW JUNE 1-7, 1995

JUNE 1, 1995 **eye LISTINGS**

FILM

FIRST RUN

OPENING THIS WEEK

BALLOT MEASURE 9  See review Page 47.
Dir. Heather MacDonald. Doc. (STC) June 2-8 — Metropolitan Cinema. (See eye's Independent & Repertory listings for times.)

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY 
See review Page 45. Dir. Clint Eastwood w/ Eastwood, Meryl Streep. (PG) Opens June 2 — Wide release.

FLUKE A tale about a dog who goes on a journey to find his family. Dir. Carlo Carlei w/ Matthew Madine, Nancy Travis. (PG) Opens June 2 — Wide release.

Ballot Measure 9 portrays Oregon's sexual battlefield

By INGRID RANDOJA

against gays.

highlights

BALLOT MEASURE 9 (Heather MacDonald, 1995) was a nasty bit of anti-gay legislation tabled during the 1992 Oregon state election that read, "homosexuality is abnormal, unnatural and perverse behavior" — meaning employers and landlords would have the legal right to discriminate

This bittersweet documentary covers the grassroots campaigns of both the hate-mongering moral majority and the pro-gay activists as they battled to swing public opinion before the vote. As New York writer B. Ruby Rich says, "This film just might be the next training manual on how to rescue the soul of America." **NNNN** (June 2 to 8, Metropolitan)

Vancouver, B.C.

'Angles' Vancouver

Nov '95

ENTERTAINMENT

DIRECTOR HEATHER MACDONALD ON OREGON'S BALLOT MEASURE 9

It was like a war

by S. Lee

Abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse—that's how a 1992 Oregon ballot initiative would have legally defined gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Heather MacDonald's compelling and thought-provoking film, *Ballot Measure 9* documents the battle over this amendment. The filmmaker accompanied her film to the Vancouver International Film Festival, and spoke with *Angles* about herself, her movie, and the state of gay rights in America.

MacDonald's many years as an actress are evident in her vocal poise and graceful bearing. She is a compact powerhouse of a woman, passionate about art and politics.

Angles: The fight over *Ballot Measure 9* went far beyond political debate. Your film shows the violence that went on—people's property and lives being threatened. What was it like to be there?

Heather MacDonald: It was like a war. It was a war. It had become so strident. I tried to show this in the film. Neighbours were yelling at one another. Families were just torn apart. Gay and lesbian people whose brothers and mother and cousins and everybody were going to vote yes. The dialogue was so strident. The kinds of materials that were being placed on the front porches of everybody in the state of Oregon were saying that the majority of lesbians deliberately spread sexual diseases, that the average homosexual male had 1,000 sexual partners a year, that 95 percent of homosexuals were pedophiles! [She gestures in disbelief.] These things were written! And Americans, when they read something, they believe it.

A: Were you frightened?

H.M.: It was pretty intense. I didn't feel physically threatened, but all the people who lived there did. So you can't help developing a certain paranoia. I did not believe that anyone was going to firebomb the room where I was sleeping, but the people I was interviewing were living in that emotional place where they knew that they had to be alert at night. But I couldn't be affected by it because I couldn't let it get in my way. And besides, I was going to go back and live in New York City. These weren't my neighbours.

A: There's a scene that everybody talks about, where a teenager at the Anne Frank exhibit talks about how it's okay to beat up fags because they're not real citizens. He's so sure of himself. It's chilling. How did you get that moment?

H.M.: Serendipity. Just total serendipity. [MacDonald's reaction mixes the excitement of the artist with the horror of the event.] It was shot the day after the election. We were running around shooting everything that was happening and this Anne Frank exhibit was on in Portland. Whoever we interviewed, wherever we went, people were talking about it. You know everybody was talking about it as being so apropos to anybody considering *Ballot Measure 9*. It was extraordinary. When I shot that I thought, "I have got my movie." I knew that that was the centrepiece—that was the voice—this was the incident. [She reenacts.] I took my camera and I was just carrying it, just wandering along, and I came upon this group of kids. Just as I happened to walk up, they started this conversation. And my sound person was wandering someplace else and I just ran. The place was jammed and I was just like a maniac—pushing people aside—getting her and coming back. I just couldn't believe it.



When it was done the class had to leave and I ran after them and I tried to talk to that kid, that boy. I came out to him and I tried to talk to him. Because he seemed to think that all gay people acted funny, that he knew who they were.

A: Is the movie reaching beyond a gay audience?

H.M.: The majority are gay people who come to see the film, I would say. But I do believe that when a non-gay audience comes, they are as affected. Certainly the press that we've gotten from it has been mainstream press. In fact I would say that it is mainstream festivals and mainstream press that have given this film the leg up that it needed, the kind of notoriety that it needed. It wouldn't have succeeded as an underground gay film.

A: Do you plan to continue with documentaries, or move into feature films?

H.M.: Oh, I would definitely like to do some narrative film. Not because I don't think documentary's powerful because I do. I think documentary to me is the most powerful because it's real. If you can make it dramatic... if you can get away from that educational idea... The documentary that interests me is always subjective, and visceral.

A: *Ballot Measure 9* has a guardedly happy ending. The Oregon Citizens Alliance [sponsor of the measure] was defeated. What's happened since?

H.M.: They considered it a victory. Lon [Mabon, Alliance leader] would have liked to have won, but he considered it a victory even though the Republican leadership, the Democratic leadership, every professional organization, every major religious group including the Catholic archbishop, came out against *Measure 9*. In press conferences, in the newspapers, there was not a group in Oregon, it seems, that was for *Measure 9*. Despite that 43 percent of the population voted for it. So Lon Mabon considered that a great success, and he immediately went to work passing local anti-gay initiatives in counties and cities around the state. He introduced a new initiative in 1994, he also introduced an initiative in Idaho. Both of those got 49 percent of the vote. In 1996 they have new initiatives coming up that they're close to passing. Also the same kind of initiative is being attempted in Washington and Idaho and this fall in Maine. The constitutionality of these amendments is now before the Supreme Court. Hearings just started this week and I would say it's very scary what could happen. Everyone is terrified. It is the most important court decision for the gay public in the U.S. [Her voice lowers.] Everything is riding on this.

Film
Fest

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
THE ARTS

Wednesday, March 1, 1995

Television

John Haslett Cuff

**Public TV
lives up
to its role**

WATCHING public television, I sometimes think its most important function lies in giving a platform for what appear to be minority interests but are of vital concern to all of us. Last night on CBC, for example, there was a documentary about women in prison who are having babies and want to keep them in prison with them. Even CTV, which is a private network, provided a platform for white supremacists, although that was not the thrust or intention of the documentary, *Hearts of Hate*.

Tonight on public television, there are two shows — **Liberty Street** (CBC at 8:30) and **Human Edge: Ballot Measure 9** (TV Ontario at 10) — dealing with the issue of homophobia.

Liberty Street is unique in the way it seems to be challenging stereotypes while reinforcing others. In tonight's episode the show focuses on gay bashing, with a victim who is both gay (of course) and aboriginal. The only character who rallies to his defence is a woman, whose sexual preference is not clear, yet she acts like a typical male with lots of testosterone. Confronting the man she thinks is responsible for assaulting her friend, she physically bullies him. He shrinks from her attack and we discover he, too, is gay. The show's only stereotypically "male" character is a womanizing goof, a sort of cut-rate Italian stallion who appears to be lacking both strong moral character and physical courage.

Human Edge: Ballot Measure

9 is also about gay bashing, but it is a documentary and has much more serious implications. "Ballot Measure 9" was an initiative to amend the state of Oregon's constitution to "prohibit and revoke laws which protect homosexuals from discrimination. The Oregon referendum . . . further mandated that all government agencies and schools recognize homosexuality as abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse."

The documentary explores the campaigns by the "yes" and "no" forces, with a definite — and understandable — bias to the "no" side. It is the most shocking and vivid portrayal of the epidemic of racial and anti-gay violence and hatred in America that I have ever seen. And what is most terrifying about it, and "Ballot Measure 9," is the extensive white-bread, suburban "respectability" of its supporters.

The firebombings, shootings, vandalism and murder committed against gays and persons of colour presented in this documentary is, as one of the show's interviewees points out, reminiscent of what occurred in Nazi Germany.

While documentaries like **Ballot Measure 9** (and public television itself) may seem to speak often for "minorities," they're really about the health of democracy and the kind of society in which we want to live. In this, public TV plays an important role, one in which commercial TV has shown little interest.

TV Worth Watching

Jim Bawden previews the week

Wed 10 p.m., ch. 19

Human Edge

This week's forceful documentary examines the politics of prejudice. In 1992 Americans in two states, Colorado and Oregon, voted on similar measures that would end any form of special status for homosexuals or lesbians.

The growing might of the Christian coalition had provoked a fundamentalist backlash against statutes which forbade discrimination on the basis of sexual preference. This 70-minute profile by director Heather MacDonald focuses on the campaign in Oregon with a brief side glance at Colorado. The Colorado vote, which was supposed to go against the right wing, was instead in favor.

In Oregon, the opposite happened with the coalition of homosexuals, lesbians and minorities defeating the proposition by 57% to 43%. What happened?

MacDonald shows how Catholics voted 2 to 1 against it because of lingering memories of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan which had tried to end separate schools in the 1920s. Other minorities were made to feel equally threatened. It's a remarkable portrait of how to coalesce a vote and get it turned in a certain way; modern politics in dramatic action.