

READER®

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M MOVIES



Ballot Measure 9

Winner of the audience award at the Sundance film festival and two years in the making, this informative and chilling documentary by Heather MacDonald (1994) is about a telling sign of the New Barbarism—the 1992 Oregon ballot proposal to deny civil rights to homosexuals—and the accompanying political campaigns for and against it. More terrifying than anything shown in the film are the

outcomes of similar propositions in Oregon and other states since 1992; when she showed this film in Berlin, MacDonald had plenty to say about those proposals, and she'll be present at the Saturday screening to discuss them. Film Center, Art Institute, Columbus Drive at Jackson, Saturday, August 5, 8:00, and Tuesday and Thursday, August 8 and 10, 6:00, 443-3737.

—Jonathan Rosenbaum

THE NEW REPUBLIC

JULY 10, 1995 • \$2.95

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

Now to another country with grave social problems—the United States. Heather MacDonald, a filmmaker of passion and skill, has directed a documentary called **Ballot Measure 9** (*Zeitgeist*) about the anti-gay-and-lesbian measure that was on the Oregon ballot in 1992. (Her picture is at the Film Forum in New York.) The measure was defeated 57 percent to 43 percent, but MacDonald takes little comfort in that result.

All the people who speak against the measure during the campaign—black and white and Native American and Asian American gays and lesbians, as well as some straight folk—are articulate and effective. So are some of the anti-gay people, especially Lon Mabon, head of the Oregon Citizens' Alliance, which backed the measure. But venom is the exclusive property of the anti-gay side, and it's frightening, whether it's in the mouth of Joe Sixpack or his white-collar co-zealot.

Violence is threatened during the campaign, and it happens. MacDonald, rightly, makes it salient in her film. All of us think we know something about gay-bashing, but perhaps we don't know as much as this picture shows us. During the campaign it became intense. (Against straight supporters, too. One straight woman has had to move twice.) Many gay people lived in absolute fear during the campaign: their cars were followed, offices were trashed, churches of sympathetic clergymen were desecrated, there were fires and beatings. In many parts of our country, it obviously takes physical as well as moral courage to be openly gay or openly to support equality for gays. And of course all this violence is ironic, if irony has any place in the matter: it needs no psychiatrist to see that a good deal of the opposition to gays

and lesbians grows not from much-vaunted moral outrage but from buried insecurities.

After the measure's defeat, the matter was not settled: twenty-three local communities in Oregon have since enacted anti-gay measures. A number of other states have comparable measures in process. Self-preening moral rectitude is far from extinct.

Yet, apparently, there's some hope. According to an ACLU ad of June 11, a recent public opinion poll showed that more than 75 percent of the American public believes that same-sex relationships are the participants' business and that discrimination against them is wrong. "Even 80 percent of people who severely disapprove of lesbian and gay relationships also believe that such relationships are a private matter, and many express strong support for gay and lesbian rights."

Good news, surely, as far as it goes (as far as any poll can go), but hardly a reason to think that the struggle is won. If only thirteen out of every 100,000 people are murdered in New York state every year, that's nothing for New Yorkers to crow about. Just as one murder per year is far too many, so one instance of gay- or lesbian-bashing is a stain on a civilized world. MacDonald's forceful film strikes a blow for that world. •

LINDA ALEWEYER



Number nine

Ballot Measure 9 directed by Heather MacDonald (Zeitgeist)

Reviewed by **Garrett Glaser**

It's amazing how quickly memories fade. Only three years ago the radical right was waging a vicious attack on gay and lesbian lives in Oregon and Colorado. The goal: to pass public referenda pro-

hibiting and revoking civil rights laws that included gay people. The wording on the Oregon measure mandated that "all government agencies and schools recognize homosexuality as abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse...and that no government property or moneys will be used to facilitate homosexuality." The measure in Oregon failed; in Colorado it won but has been tied up in a court battle over its constitutionality ever since and is expected to be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court later this year.

Ballot Measure 9 is an engrossing and skilled piece of work. It is the story of the impact the measure had in Oregon and how it helped to galvanize the lesbian and gay community there. Perhaps most valuable, it sheds light on the opposition's brilliant strategy of framing the issue of equality as one of "special rights."

Openly lesbian filmmaker Heather MacDonald previously made *Kiev Blue*, about gay and lesbian life in the Ukraine. Now, for an amazingly modest budget of \$150,000 from foundations and private investors, she has—with her crew—managed to produce one of the best of a series of recent documentaries about the radical right. MacDonald first made the film as a grassroots organizing tool, but the constant rightward tide of political events continues to ensure the film's interest for a larger, more mainstream audience.

Ballot Measure 9 has already won awards at the Sundance and Berlin film festivals and is being distributed theatrically by Zeitgeist Films. It will hit screens this summer and fall in about 40 cities. There is interest as well from several broadcast outlets.

If it goes to TV, *Ballot Measure 9* will surely generate strong reactions. Even those who consider themselves apolitical will be appalled by the tactics of the scurrilous propagandists and radical right-wing activists whose actions in Oregon translated into assaults and murders of gay and lesbian people there. According to the documentary, gay bashings in the state increased 500% near Election Day. There were as well the murders of an African-American out lesbian, Hatie Mae Cohens, and her gay male housemate, Brian Mock, whose home was firebombed.

Of all the insights shared during the film, a remark from activist Donna Red Wing stands out. She notes that the national fund-raising ability and power of the opposition come from extraordinary grassroots organizing capabilities. I wonder when we will get there too.

Heather McDonald and *Ballot Measure 9* MEASURE BY MEASURE

IN 1992 the Oregon Citizens' Alliance (OCA) provoked a firestorm by sponsoring *Ballot Measure 9*, an aggressive maneuver to revoke and preclude laws protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination. Homosexuality, the measure stated, is "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse." Measure 9 tapped into America's culture war, mining this country's deep prejudices concerning diversity and affirmative action. As citizen groups polarized and Oregon's gay and lesbian communities mobilized for political action, the state suffered an unprecedented wave of anti-gay violence. Gay activist Scott Seibert characterized the initiative as "the neutron bomb of politics"; OCA chair Lon Mabon proclaimed it "a simple battle between good and evil." Both wore bulletproof vests on election night. In the end, *Ballot Measure 9* was defeated by a margin of 57 percent to 43 percent. Documentary filmmaker Heather McDonald (*Kitchen Talk USSR*, *Kiev Blue*, *Gibbs' Garden*) spent eight months and shot 300 hours of footage to put together this story, which won the 1995 Sundance Audience Award. *Ballot Measure 9* premieres as anti-gay initiatives threaten to appear on 1996 state ballots in Washington and across the country.

Who is Lon Mabon, and what's the agenda of the Oregon Citizens' Alliance?

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OPEN CITY

Lon Mabon likes power—that's clear. But he and his wife (OCA treasurer) Bonnie Mabon aren't really socking away a lot of money—this is not a Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker kind of thing. He and especially Bonnie are fueled by a real sense that they're doing a good thing for society. The first thing that the OCA worked on as a group was anti-abortion legislation, and they weren't very successful. But in 1988 the then-governor of Oregon passed a governor's order to prevent discrimination against gay and lesbian people working in state government. Lon organized people around that to overturn it; that was *Ballot Measure 8*. The OCA got a lot of support, and the initiative passed.

Did that success take a lot of people by surprise?

Oh yes. The gay community didn't take him seriously until *Measure 8* went through. But they organized very quickly when *Ballot Measure 9* was introduced. They knew they had to do this time.

*Your own position as a "No on 9" supporter is clear from the outset of *Ballot Measure 9*, but by choosing a documentary format you open yourself up to all sorts of questions about objectivity and balance. Considering how volatile the discourse was, and how close you are to the issues, how much did you grapple with presenting both sides of the issue fairly?*

I was never looking for balance—I was looking for credibility. If I tried to make people look foolish, my audience wasn't going to listen to it—they'd just laugh at it. For instance, there was this one section I called "Lies and Feces." I'd edited it so that all the grotesque stereotypes and outrageous claims of "Yes on 9" proponents built to this overwhelming cacophony of voices and written text: "Homosexuality's the killer lifestyle"—"90 percent of pedophiles are gay"—"And that's a fact"—"Mudwalling"—"Fact"—"Defecation"—"Fact." But even though the sequence was horrifying and hysterically funny at the same time, it crossed the line and jeopardized my credibility, so I cut back on the special effects and restored the full sentences.

I think that section was particularly effective because you did pull back and just let them talk; the intent was allowed to reveal itself as harmful, to unmask its own absurdities. These "Yes on 9" speeches also revealed something really fascinating: an obsessive, detailed, and almost prurient interest in "deviant" sex. Listening to the rhetoric, I couldn't help but think of the kid who's just discovered the word "shit" and says it over and over again for the shock effect.

Well, that's really why I kept that sequence—to illustrate the barrage of shock tactics the homosexual community was forced to listen to; I just couldn't believe what I was hearing. ("Yes on 9" speakers) were actually talking about the number of tablespoons of feces that the average homosexual supposedly ingests each year. Everywhere we went it was this kind of discussion. The real issue was tolerance and civil rights. But this got translated by the Right into special rights for deviants.

I noticed that invariably when you asked people why they had voted "yes" on 9, they prefaced their responses with "I'm not a bigot" or "I'm not anti-gay, but I'm also not for spe-



Portland's "No on 9" rally from Heather McDonald's documentary *Ballot Measure 9*.

cial rights. "Why do you think so many people bought into the "special rights" argument, the "logic" of which would follow that something as basic as getting and keeping a job is a "special right"?"

I think that it has to do with this country's innate racism and an intense resurgence of moralism. For example, there was an anti-gay initiative in Oregon in 1993. Local courts found it unconstitutional, but a few weeks ago the Federal Court of Appeals in Cincinnati found it constitutional. They overturned the lower courts because homosexuals are not an identifiable race or class; they are identified by their conduct. The argument goes that if this is something you do and you can choose not to do it, why should you be protected un-

INTERVIEW TONIA STEED

der the constitution? What's more baffling is that the Federal Appeals Court should use the language of the radical Right—that it is "conduct," that homosexuality is merely a behavior. This is the politics of confusion—a web of misinformation that plays right into this country's fears of diversity and affirmative action.

These kind of grassroots political movements often catch people by surprise, as an "unaccountable" surge in extremism. What are your thoughts on this in relation to Oregon in '92 and the anti-gay measures in general? Why the surge?

Backlash. The gay and lesbian community has become more successful, more visible, and more of an accepted part of society.

*On the heels of *Ballot Measure 9's* defeat in Oregon, anti-gay Amendment 2 passed in Colorado. What made the difference?*

The Colorado amendment was short and misleadingly simple, something like, "Sexual orientation will not be used as criteria for affirmative action, quotas, or laws against dis-

crimination." I think if you ask most people in Colorado if they think that lesbians and gay people should be protected from job discrimination, they'd answer, "Well, certainly." Everyone knows how important it is to have a job in this country. But the way it was worded—hidden behind affirmative action and quotas—suggested that gays and lesbians might get "special" rights. Because it was so mild-sounding and the campaign relatively calm, it passed. Oregon made the mistake of going in the opposite direction and throwing everything in—associating it with bestiality, sadism, immorality; those are very virulent words, and they created a very virulent dialogue. Even the Republican leadership came out against *Ballot Measure 9* because it was so draconian. And that's why initiatives since then have been based on the Colorado amendment. The Idaho initiative, the ones being framed here in Washington, all are couched in that non-threatening language. Even on election night, Lon Mabon was already strategizing about taking out the references to pedophilia and abnormality in the Oregon ballot. He already knew he'd made a mistake.

*In the aftermath of *Ballot Measure 9*, have the gay and lesbian communities in Oregon remained mobilized?*

Some great things have happened in Oregon in terms of the human rights alliance that was formed in rural areas—they're still functioning units. That's a success story. Unfortunately, the types of urban conditions that developed around *Ballot Measure 9* are disintegrating. There were a lot of burned-out people, and the community suffered a lot of psychic damage. Lon got 49 percent of the vote in '94. Is this the tenor in this country now, leaning so far to the right, going to push it over and get it passed in '96? I'll be watching. ☐



In Heather MacDonald's award-winning film, "Ballot Measure 9," opening tonight at Montpelier's Savoy Theater, "Walk for Love and Justice" participants celebrate their arrival in Portland, after their two-week trek across Oregon.

'Ballot Measure 9' Tells Dramatic, Sad Tale Of Oregon Gay-Bashing

By JIM LOWE
Times Argus Arts Editor

When "Ballot Measure 9" opened in New York the same week as "Pocahontas," Variety magazine reported some 10 positive reviews for "Pocahontas," 12 for "Ballot Measure 9."

L.A. Weekly called it "easily one of the best movies of the year" — not bad for a documentary film, particularly one chronicling one of the biggest gay-bashing efforts in recent American history.

"The fact that it won the 1995 Audience Award at Sundance has sort of catapulted it toward a new place — where newspapers are reviewing it, op. ed. writers are writing about it," filmmaker Heather MacDonald said. "The audience is a broader audience, not just an activist audience."

"Ballot Measure 9" opens tonight at the Savoy Theater in Montpelier, with screenings at 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. through Nov. 2. MacDonald will attend open discussions after both shows, tonight and Saturday.

Film

In 1992, the Oregon Citizen's Alliance attempted to amend the state constitution to revoke laws protecting gay men and lesbians from discrimination. But unlike the Colorado law, it went on to tie homosexuality to pedophilia and sadomasochism, declaring it to be "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse," mandating that schools and government agencies teach it as such.

For eight months, discussions of the morality and "dangers" of homosexuality erupted into acts of vandalism, harassment, physical attacks, and even murder against gay men and lesbians, and their supporters. The Democratic and Republican party leaderships, the Jewish Board of Rabbis, the Roman Catholic Archbishop, unions and professional groups all decried Ballot Measure Nine. Still, it was defeated by only a slim of margins, winning 44 percent of the vote.

Interestingly, the largest group voting for the measure were people aged 30-44, those likely to have children in school. People over 60, who had lived through World War II, saw it as a discrimination issue and were the largest group voting against the measure. Catholics, who suffered the same "special rights" rhetoric from the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, voted "no" two-to-one.

MacDonald culled some 300 hours of film to create "Ballot Measure 9," telling a story of driving suspense and urgency. Unlike most documentaries, the film follows people through, she explained in a telephone interview Wednesday from her New York City home. "It builds emotionally as a fiction film. We follow chronologically as the story builds," she said.

MacDonald was already working on a different documentary, about violence against lesbians and gay men in the United States, when the measure was proposed. "I was researching stories, and that took me to Oregon, because we had heard that there was a lot of violence around this ballot initiative," she said.

It was February prior to the November elections in 1992, and the rhetoric had been flying around the state for six to eight months already. MacDonald said. "There's a big skinhead neo-Nazi movement in the Northwest, and I guess the language being used around the initiative was empowering them to harm people," she said, "because it was so dehumanizing, not only in the ballot initiative, but in the media — the rhetoric the radical right was using. So there was a lot of violence."

People were beginning to track that violence. The police department had already formed a new bias-crime unit, and the gay and lesbian community had founded a new hotline to report violence. "And it was growing," MacDonald said. "So that seemed to be a good story, how that kind of dehumanizing rhetoric does lead to violence. Just being there in-person in this war-zone feeling, I felt the power to make a full-length documentary."

MacDonald joined the "Walk for Love and Justice" with her camera, walking across the state and sleeping on church floors at night, meeting many of people who would become the main characters in the film. "We were out there constantly the weeks before the election, shooting everything. So much was happening, the debates, a lot more events of violence," MacDonald said.

Approaching the pro-Measure Nine side didn't prove to be particularly difficult either. The international television press was already interviewing Lon Mabon, the head of the Oregon Citizen's Alliance. "It was a precedent-setting initiative, amending the state constitution to take away rights people already have," MacDonald said. "So Mabon was being interviewed many times a day by a lot of different TV crews. So our asking for an interview didn't seem peculiar," she said.

"We didn't present ourselves as the enemy. We didn't try to alienate him. We wanted to hear everything he wanted to say," she said.

MacDonald found, to her surprise, interviewing people on the street, that those pro-Measure Nine weren't unpleasant or ugly. "Even those two young boys that people always talk about right after the film, those are two nice young men. I was horrified that they were saying those things," she said.

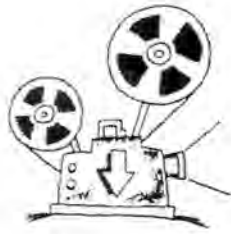
One, who lives in a very conservative town, believed gays and lesbians should be taken off the street, perhaps sending them to Illinois, so that young people wouldn't have to see them. "It gets a huge laugh in the audience, and at the same time, I think it's when people begin getting really uncomfortable," MacDonald said. "But I felt badly about putting that young man in there, and having people laugh. He was a nice kid."

MacDonald actually approached the boy after the film was completed. "I felt I needed to explain to him," she said. "He invited us to speak to his church group. So I think it's very frightening what the young people say, but I think they've been given so much wrong information."

Another young man was filmed with other students visiting an Anne Frank exhibit in Portland at the same time as the ballot issue. "This young teen-ager, 15 or 16, goes into a long thing about how beating up gays is not the same as Jews, because Jews are citizens. Beating up a gay is not like beating up a citizen," she said.

MacDonald found filming "Ballot Measure 9" draining emotionally, but ultimately rewarding. "It got incredible reviews. I haven't seen a bad review," she said.

She has already accompanied the film to 15 cities, and the discussions afterward have run so long that they had to be asked to leave the theater. "The one thing that pleases me most is that I've had people come up to me and say, 'I've never really acted on something, and somehow, now feel I must respond in some way.' And they're not talking about fighting specifically the radical right, or lesbian-gay issues, they're simply talking about taking action in their own lives — being inspired by the courage of the people in the film to speak out."



REEL UNDERGROUND



FILM REVIEWS
AND CALENDAR
BY PAUL D. GOETZ

Ballot Measure 9 and the Politics of Hate

The Varsity

(4329 University Way NE, 632-3131)

Ballot Measure 9

July 14-17 (*produced and directed by Heather McDonald*). No matter what your viewpoint, this prize-winning chronicle of the 1992 campaigns for and against Oregon's anti-gay initiative is one of the most powerfully engaging films you are likely to see this year. Unfolding with the intensity of a suspense film, McDonald has captured the climate of ignorance and deeply ingrained anti-gay prejudice which was whipped into a storm of violence by the Oregon Citizens' Alliance (OCA)'s scandalously vilifying campaign. At the same time, she has documented the extraordinary power of grass roots organizing crossing lines of race, religion, and sexual orientation. It's a film that sounds an alarm and practically demands a response. Its gravity is underlined by the vow of the OCA's Chairman Lon Mabon (the measure's sponsor) to introduce similar measures across the country.

Oregon's initiative would have revoked and prohibited laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination. It would have further mandated that governments and agencies including the state Department of Higher Education encourage Oregon's youth to see homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse," and teach "that these behaviors be discouraged and avoided." If enacted, discrimination in the areas of housing, employment, and public accommodation would have been legalized.

From the beginning, however, the OCA's strategy, which lesbian activist Donna Red Wing admits was "brilliant," was to camouflage their agenda with the lie that gay and lesbian people had attained or were seeking "special" rather than equal rights. With national backing, they also distributed flyers and videos based on widely discredited "research" that in Red Wing's words, "took the stereotypes of homosexual people and turned them into grotesque caricatures." Many in the gay and lesbian community were surprised by the ignorance of those who believed the OCA's claims - that homosexuals regularly ingest feces, recruit children, and are 90 times more likely to be pedophiles. Because of that, the rallies in opposition to Measure 9 were, in part, a call to educate and enlighten - a call to "come out."

McDonald gives equal time to many on both sides of the issue, and the portraits that evolve are sometimes scary, sometimes inspiring, but always deeply revealing. Like so many among the religious right who somehow confuse love and hate, the director of the Klamath Co. OCA, Orin Camenish, and his family describe in one breath how they "love the homosexual" and in another how they equate them with disease-carrying rats. But it's Kevin Berrill of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force who most eloquently clarifies the situation when he says before the Oregon legislature, "While the OCA does not espouse violence, they must be held accountable for creating an atmosphere of bigotry that facilitates violence. By sponsoring this initiative and by waging a campaign of lies, the OCA has opened up a Pandora's Box of hatred that has undermined civility, safety and democracy." It's a position that is impossible to deny.

Sex-orientation politics in Oregon

By Desmond Ryan
INQUIRER MOVIE CRITIC

The bland title *Ballot Measure 9* hardly conveys the charged emotion and unbridled hatred chronicled in Heather MacDonald's compelling, and sometimes appalling, look at a confrontation between the Christian right and Oregon's gay and lesbian community three years ago.

The Pacific Northwest setting, which we associate with laid-back liberalism, makes the angry voices in *Ballot Measure 9* all the more chilling. Three years ago, Oregon voters were asked to vote down legislation that banned discrimination against homosexuals, on the ground that it gave them special rights. The

homosexual community rejoined that gays and lesbians simply wanted the same rights as everyone else, and the battle began.

MacDonald lets both sides talk, and her film is both honest and depressing in charting the chasms that divide this country.

Ballot Measure 9 ★★★

Produced and directed by Heather MacDonald.

Running time: 1 hour, 12 mins.

Parent's guide: no MPAA rating (profanity, adult themes)

Showing at: Free Library, tonight at 8:30 and tomorrow at 7 p.m. MacDonald will attend both screenings.

Ballot Measure 9 ★★★ A compelling and often chilling documentary that chronicles the charged collision between the Christian right and Oregon's gay community over a referendum to repeal legal protections for homosexuals. 1 hr. 12
--D.R.