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How Anti-Gay Effort Divided a State

Riveting film on Measure 9 ballot issue in Oregon

BY PETER STACK

Chronicle Staff Critic

'Ballot Measure 9," playing today through Thursday, is an emotionally sizzling documentary about the divisive and at times twisted campaign for an "anti-gay" initiative in Oregon in 1992 that almost turned the state upside-down, politically, as it divided families, neighbors, religious groups and politicians.

Director Heather MacDonald's film, essentially an advocacy piece, is loaded with far more than it seems on the surface. She focuses on the passions that surrounded the initiative from all sides — from the frightened and outraged defenses of lesbians and gays, to the nearly hellfire-and-brimstone attacks of the religious right, whose tactics prompted a violent anti-gay hysteria in the state.

Entering what was a political war zone, the New York-based film maker captured human zeal at its worst and best, using direct interviews and footage from campaign speeches and rallies, sometimes with overlays of crawling text in the bulletin-style of television news programs.

Depressing and Inspiring

The result is a film that gives both a depressing and inspiring look at grassroots activism and what may have foreshadowed the political future in many states via a climate of hate fanned by extremist groups opposed to "diversity."

Following the lead of Colorado,



Anti-Measure 9 forces rallied to preserve constitutional rights for Oregon gays and lesbians

which adopted its anti-gay Amendment 2 (later ruled unconstitutional), Oregon's Measure 9 (which lost at the polls) was begun as an initiative by a group called the Oregon Citizens' Alliance, describing itself as a "family values" organization, with strong Christian-right backing.


The measure attempted to amend the state constitution to prevent and revoke laws protecting lesbians and gays from discrimination.

With the rallying cry that the initiative was a "simple battle between good and evil," according to Oregon Citizens' Alliance chairman Lou Mabon, a born-again Christian, the measure soon began to both confuse and inflame the public. The documentary shows the alliance's drive to paint homosexuals as "wanting special rights"

to pursue deviant behavior, including the recruitment of children into their ranks. In fact, lesbians and gays were already protected under constitutional rights extended to all Oregon citizens. Measure 9 would have specifically excluded homosexuals from having those rights.

Taken almost by surprise by the sudden anti-gay drive, lesbians and gays throughout Oregon were forced to adopt a defensive posture, while fiery debate often spilled over into an outright hate campaign against homosexuals, subjecting many of them to vicious taunts or vandalism to their property. They were physically attacked in increased numbers throughout the state as the hate went on to include racist and religious attacks against blacks, Jews and Catholics.

"No on 9" advocates were fol-

 **BALLOT MEASURE 9:** Documentary on the 1992 anti-gay initiative in Oregon. Directed by Heather MacDonald. (Not rated. 72 minutes. At the Castro Theatre through Thursday.)

lowed by gunmen in pickup trucks, and subjected to vile phone harassment. One woman who lived on a ranch said her horse was maimed, while a couple in Southern Oregon whose daughter is a lesbian said the harassment was so terrifying they considered buying guns.

Both Sides Interviewed

Filmed over a period of eight months, MacDonald's fast-paced film was made from more than 300 hours of material she shot or gathered from other sources. She interviewed leaders on both sides of the debate, along with voters on the street, school students and religious leaders. A high-school boy said all "faggots should be rounded up and shipped out of the U.S. — to Illinois or something." A Catholic priest opposed to Measure 9 pleads for sanity in a crusade by pro-9 forces against Roman Catholics, viewed as sympathetic toward gays.

The film leaves a bitter aftertaste in view of the fact that the almost heroic defense by the homosexual community — which turned out to be a defense of already-guaranteed civil rights — was far from a gain, but, in the words of one homosexual leader, "just holding ground." On the other hand, the anti-gay forces who believe they have sounded an important moral alarm are currently attempting to organize similar efforts elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest.

Los Angeles Times

FRIDAY, JULY 14, 1995

A Chilling Account of an Anti-Gay Campaign

MOVIE REVIEW

By KEVIN THOMAS
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Heather MacDonald's "Ballot Measure 9"—a comprehensive, incisive documentary on the emotion-charged campaign surrounding the 1992 Oregon anti-gay measure—is all the more chilling because of its methodical, cool approach.

Wisely, MacDonald not only lets gay activists have their say but also allows Lon Mabon, chairman of the Oregon Citizen's Alliance, and numerous associates and supporters, to express their profoundly negative view of gays and lesbians. Many will recall how the vote went, but so skillful is MacDonald that she actually generates suspense as to its outcome.

"Ballot Measure 9" is a truly frightening film. It shows how a group of well-organized members of the extreme religious right used the Bible's condemnation of homosexuality as a license to indulge in vicious, no-holds-barred rabble-rousing.

A lesbian points out that the Bible was used in the same way to oppress African Americans and women, but clearly these religious fundamentalists are the last to consider the implications of extensive biblical scholarship arguing that the Bible's homophobic passages are apocryphal.

In any event, we're shown the OCA using timeless "big lie" tactics, hurling specious statistics and depicting gays and lesbians as the most depraved minions of Satan imaginable. It raised homophobia in Oregon to a life endangering level during the campaign.

The OCA is especially adept at exploiting the right-wing buzz phrases "special rights" and "family values" against gays and lesbians. At the same time, the OCA's media offensive united the state's gays and lesbians as never before,

and they fought back in a manner that invited the general public to perceive the larger civil and constitutional rights issues. As a young high school student asks an OCA panel: "Who's next?"

Through MacDonald's interplay of interviews with representatives of both sides, a lot of blunt truths emerge as the campaign grows increasingly bitter.

"Ballot Measure 9" makes painfully clear just how widespread ignorance of homosexuality is. As one lesbian remarks, it's as if the OCA believed everybody was born heterosexual, but that gays and lesbians chose to be "wicked." We see that those who believe that sexual orientation is a matter of choice also believe that gays and lesbians are somehow able to "recruit" youngsters to their "cause," a fear greatly heightened in the age of AIDS.

MacDonald reveals the OCA painting most gays as child molesters in the face of decades of scientific research that indicates otherwise; that more young adults, the majority presumably the parents of young children, than older people were in favor of Ballot 9 suggests just how potent the OCA

message is.

"Ballot Measure 9" is a stirring, deeply troubling account of what combatants on both sides would agree is a first round in what is rapidly becoming a nationwide human rights struggle, one sure to figure in next year's presidential campaign.

■ **Unrated.** *Times guidelines: The film is appropriate for teens but is too intense for those younger.*

'Ballot Measure 9'

A Zeitgeist Films release. Producer-director Heather MacDonald. Executive producer James D. Brubaker. Principal cinematographer Ellen Hansen. Editors MacDonald, B.B. Jorissen. Music Julian Dyan Russell. Running time: 1 hour, 12 minutes.

■ *Exclusively at the Los Feliz 3, 1822 N. Vermont Ave., (213) 664-2169.*

LA WEEKLY

JULY 21-JULY 27, 1995

FILM NEW RELEASES

BALLOT MEASURE 9

This is easily one of the best movies of the year, full of the kind of gut-wrenching scares that Mel, Sly and Tom wouldn't survive for a minute. Director Heather MacDonal takes a cool, clear-eyed approach to her subject matter — basically, the political-cultural pulse of America — and as a result, *Ballot Measure 9* positively simmers. Infuriating, inspiring and deeply depressing, this documentary is mandatory viewing for those who've given up hope, and those still fighting to make America a true democracy. *Measure 9*, a bid to deny gays and lesbians their civil rights, was put on Oregon's ballot in 1992. National attention on the measure was dwarfed by coverage of Colorado's similar initiative; unlike Colorado, Oregon defeated the proposal. Along the way, people were killed, families torn apart and communities splintered. The gay community of Oregon was given a face and developed a backbone. But in this anti-affirmative-action, post-Proposition 187 climate, the film speaks to larger issues than just gay rights, focusing in on national character and "the common good." Although the male teen who wants gays sent to another country, "... like Illinois," elicits dark laughter, the faces of young children twisted in glee as they chant hateful slogans is haunting and sobering. (*Los Feliz*)(Ernest Hardy) →

SEWEEKLY

Film



Movie Capsules

☛ points to recommended films. Critics: Michael Arago (M.A.), William O. Goggins (W.G.), Glen Helfand (G.H.), Daniel Mangin (D.M.), Sia Michel (S.M.), Paul Reidinger (P.R.). See Showtime (p. 35) for theater information and times.

Opening

☛ **Ballot Measure 9** "This is a cultural war," declares a proponent of the 1992 Oregon ballot initiative that would have exempted homosexuals from anti-discrimination protection. His statement is about the only thing on which pro- and anti-gay forces agree in Heather MacDonald's chronicle of the heated election process. The Oregon debate hinged on religion, language and "scientific fact." What gays call "equal rights," Yes on 9 partisans revile as "special rights." Gays maintain they're just like other Oregonians; Yes on 9ers cite dated theories of homosexuality as a mental illness and support their notions with salacious, out-of-context gay-parade footage. The approach is so effective that, rues one lesbian activist, "We're always reacting instead of acting." MacDonald represents the Yes on 9 folks with a fairly even hand, particularly those with "honest," if misinformed, views of homosexuality. But her film provides graphic proof that inflammatory rhetoric, whatever its impetus, encourages violence. Despite physical attacks, the message that emerges for gays is that more visibility, not less, is the best response. Pro-gay activists won the Oregon battle, but a closing title reminds viewers that the "cultural war" continues elsewhere. *Ballot Measure 9* will provide inspiration and tactical advice to grass-roots organizers nationwide. (D.M.)

MAY 17-23, 1995

Dynamic documentary tracks drastic measure

BY HEATHER WISNER

In *Ballot Measure 9*, Heather MacDonald's concise, well-made documentary on the 1992 battle over Oregon's anti-gay initiative, the phrase "cultural war" lingers eerily. We hear it from Oregon Citizens Alliance leader Lon Mabon, who drafted the legislation; from Donna Red Wing, Portland's Lesbian Community Project director, who helped lead the opposition; even from right-wing presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan, whose National Republican Convention address MacDonald splices into local footage.

As the election draws near, anti-gay rhetoric and violence escalate, making this particular dispute seem more like physical than ideological warfare. Nonetheless, the film is an early general forecast of the cultural clash that would erupt nationally after Clinton's election.

Ballot Measure 9 has key elements of a good feature film: drama, action, comedy and suspense. Although we know the outcome of the election, MacDonald's front-line approach amplifies the tension. Rather than engaging in debate, she wisely lets the cameras simply roll as 'Yes on 9' backers voice uneducated, fairly standard biases against gays and lesbians: homosexuals will recruit my child, corrupt the moral universe, take my job via hiring quotas, further the AIDS epidemic.

If these biases are passionately felt, solutions are less clearly articulated, and frequently suggest a limited world view. "I think we should move take 'em [gays] out of the U.S.," says one young man, "and move 'em

to ... Illinois."

The OCA is not quite so dumb, however. "It's brilliant,"

'abnormal' bit, but lost anyway.)

Despite dirty politicking—the OCA distances itself from anti-gay crimes committed before the election by declaring that they were probably staged by activists, "as a media tool"—Mabon's wife Bonnie, and several others seem to sincerely believe that gays and lesbians just need "help," and that legislating them out of domestic partnership, adopting children, renting or keeping their jobs is the only way to alert them to the error of their ways.

MacDonald, whose previous work includes *Kiev Blue*, a documentary on the lives of gay men and lesbians in Russia, culled the 72-minute *Ballot*



A protest rally in *Ballot Measure 9*

liant," says Red Wing of the initiative's "No special rights" slogan: "I look at that and ask myself, 'Should gays and lesbians have special rights?' and then I think, 'Well of course not.'"

The OCA, with alarming efficiency, manipulates, even creates statistics, making outrageous claims about gay and lesbian sexuality to support their view that homosexuality is "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse," and should be presented as such by schools and state agencies. (Their toned-down version of the measure, modeled after Colorado's Amendment 2 and resubmitted in '94, left out the

Measure 9 from 300 hours of material shot over eight months. She captures the highs and lows of the 'No on 9' campaign, from the triumphant two-week Walk for Love and Justice to the vandalized homes and headquarters and the arson-related deaths of two campaigners. *Measure 9* paired seasoned activists like Rainbow Coalition co-chair Kathleen Sadat with first timers like Jim and Elise Self, the straight, small-town, middle-aged parents of a lesbian daughter. Portland Chief of Police Tom Potter (father of a lesbian officer), also got involved, putting together

protection programs for 'No on 9' leaders just before the election.

Ballot Measure 9 serves not only as a training film on grassroots activism, but as historical record and sociologic overview. The cross-section of people voting against the measure — including Catholics and many people over 60, who had witnessed similar discrimination — is somewhat surprising.

The measure was defeated by a narrow 53 to 47 percent margin, and passed in several small Oregon towns, although emergency statewide legislation was subsequently drafted to prevent the measure from being enacted. In 1992 there were more reports of anti-gay violence in Portland than in Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco or New York City. The same year that *Measure 9* lost, Amendment 2 passed. "What have we won?" Red Wing asks of a cheering crowd on election night. The OCA has promised to return in 1996, leaving that question as yet unanswered.

Ballot Measure 9, winner of the 1995 Sundance Film Festival Audience Award, plays the Castro Theatre (429 Castro St.) May 22-25. Donna Red Wing and Kathleen Sadat will appear in person on opening night.

September 8-14, 1998

The Hollywood Reporter

BALLOT MEASURE 9
(KCET) 10 tonight

Television
Brief

This utterly devastating, award-winning film about Oregon's attempt to pass a controversial anti-gay rights initiative makes its central points by contrasting compassion with anger in an almost light-hearted way.

Whether tuning in on television ads or meeting lesbian rights activist Donna Red Wing, producer-director Heather Lyn MacDonald catches the tenor and intensity of the campaign with almost casual grace.

In the process, this Zeitgeist Films production shows how a documentary, despite containing explicit language expressing violent sentiments, can be highly informative, accessible to a wide variety of viewers and politically correct without being dogmatic.

— *Laurence Vittes*

Heather McDonald's
'Ballot Measure 9'

Fear and Loathing in Oregon

by Marianne Dresser



For queers and other "marginalized" constituencies, the 1992 elections and Clinton's victory offered the hope of a return to sanity and the re-establishment of egalitarian democratic principles in government office.

Three years later, and a whole lot of high hopes deferred, a compelling documentary of one specific struggle appears to remind us that the battle to preserve civil rights is far from won. Heather McDonald's *Ballot Measure 9* (plays the Castro Theatre May 22-25) is a cogent,

clear, and moving account of the hard work, determination, and moral courage of the Oregonians who stood their ground against a powerful fundamentalist Christian assault on lesbian and gay civil rights. The film's straight-ahead documentary style lets the story unfold like the high drama that it is. *Ballot Measure 9* burns with energy and conviction.

The film takes us right into the belly of the beast: meetings of the Oregon Citizens' Alliance, a born-again Christian group led by Lou

Mabon, dedicated to "the battle between good and evil" — so-called "Christians" vs. "less than human" homosexuals seeking "special rights." OCA's virulent fear- and hate-driven rhetoric fueled a well-executed, highly organized campaign for ballot measure 9, which defined homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse," and sought to institutionalize discrimination in housing, employment, and access to public services on the basis of sexual orientation.

Continued on page 36

'Measure 9'

Continued from cover

As lesbian and gay Oregonians woke up to the time bomb at the heart of their rural and small-town communities, they pulled together to combat the OCA machine. Their successful counter-campaign is a model of how to beat the Right with the most basic and effective tools of democratic politics — tireless grass-roots organizing and coalition-building.

Unlikely alliances

Activist Donna Red Wing emphasizes the importance of coming out: "the most important political act of your life." This is especially true for gay people living in rural communities, where isolation and lack of a centralized community can weaken a cohesive bloc of resistance.

Kathleen Saadat emerges as a powerful and charismatic hero of the struggle. She speaks movingly of her process of coming out in the African American community and forging crucial alliances with black Americans by demonstrating the clear links between the civil rights movement and lesbian/gay rights. A particular strength of the film is how it draws critical parallels between other examples of oppression rooted in hatred of difference, both in Oregon's own history and world history. "No On 9" activists were able to garner strong support from other communities not commonly thought of as particularly sympathetic to queers: people of color, Catholics, Jews, and other

religious minorities, and the elderly (who witnessed firsthand the destructive power of the Nazi rhetoric of the '30s, of which OCA and other Religious Right proselytizing is chillingly reminiscent).

The film tracks the appalling escalation of violence against lesbian and gay people and "No On 9" supporters, culminating in the deaths of two young people in a firebomb attack on their Salem home. A straight woman who spoke out against the measure was repeatedly stalked and harassed, and the parents of a lesbian who publicly "came out" in support of their daughter in an interview in the local press became the target of a hate campaign.

The OCA denied any culpability in what one gay activist called a "reign of terror," but murderous threats left on the "No On 9" answering machine and slogans spray-painted on church walls were capped with the words: "Yes on 9."

Ballot Measure 9 should be shown in every high school, at every activist training, and on public television stations nationwide. More than ever, its message must be heard and heeded as the nation lurches ominously to the right and religious fundamentalists grow increasingly skillful at creating ignorance-bred hatred. As the film poster puts it, a similar assault may be coming soon to a town near you. See this film, and get busy. ▼

■ **Ballot Measure 9** plays **The Castro Theatre** May 22-25. Call 621-6120 for information.



Los Angeles **Reader**

Festival Flings Open Closet Doors




■ **OUTFEST '95: THE LOS ANGELES GAY & LESBIAN FILM FESTIVAL.** AT THE DIRECTORS GUILD OF AMERICA THEATER THROUGH JULY 16. SEE BOX ON PAGE 31 FOR COMPLETE SCHEDULE. FOR TICKETS, CALL (213) 466-1767.

The documentary *Ballot Measure 9* illustrates that violence may not be the key to change. Don't be put off by the colorless title or the genre: Heather MacDonald's compelling film is a candid, emotionally charged examination of the 1992 faceoff between Oregon's God-fearing right and its gay and lesbian population, over a measure denying gays civil rights. And, while the election results are common knowledge, MacDonald builds suspense aggressively by tracking the opposing campaigns in a countdown from April to the election in November.



"Aberration ... unnatural ... perverse" are among the words used earnestly by the hets determined to preserve "family values." Astutely, MacDonald doesn't display any prejudice by emphasizing either side's point of view. She doesn't have to: By giving equal time to the pro and con factions, she gives us the unique opportunity to understand both.

MacDonald's interview format enables viewers a visceral involvement with the cast of characters. The angst, desperation, and unity of the gay and lesbian community are manifested tangibly, as are the terror and self-righteousness of the "moral majority." One particularly unaware rightist states unequivocally, "If you talk about homosexuality in the open, people will become homosexuals." The pervading lesson cannot be stated too often: History *does* repeat itself — no one "talked" about the Jews during World War II, and look at the result. What's the difference? 

Los Angeles **Reader** July 7, 1995



C I N E M A



Ballot Measure 9. Heather MacDonald's compelling documentary offers a candid, emotionally charged examination of the 1992 face-off between the God-fearing right and Oregon's gay and lesbian population, over a measure denying gays civil rights. And, while the election results are common knowledge, MacDonald builds suspense aggressively by tracking the opposing campaigns in a countdown from April up to the election in November. Astutely, MacDonald doesn't display any prejudice by emphasizing either side's point of view. She doesn't have to: By giving equal time to the pro and con factions, she gives us the unique opportunity to understand both. MacDonald's interview format enables viewers to have a visceral involvement with the cast of characters. The angst, desperation, and unity of the gay and lesbian community are manifested tangibly, as are the terror and self-righteousness of the "moral majority." (Michael Frym) (Los Feliz)

Los Angeles **Reader** July 21, 1995

BALLOT MEASURE 9

(DOCU)

An Oregon Tape Project production. Produced, directed by Heather MacDonald. Executive producer, David Meieran. Regional producer, Linda Kliewer. Camera (color), Ellen Hansen, others; editors, MacDonald, B.B. Jorissen; music, Julian Dylan Russell; associate producers, Jorissen, Esther Cassidy. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Park City, Jan. 23, 1993. Running time: 71 MIN.

"Ballot Measure 9," Heather MacDonald's provocative documentary, provides an intriguing chronicle of what happened in Oregon during the 1992 campaign for the anti-gay ballot initiative. Though the results are known, this important account also works effectively as a suspenseful tale, one that goes beyond gay rights to encompass such timely and broader issues as human rights, cultural diversity and the American political system. Informative docu should get wide exposure on public TV and video and could also be used as classroom material.

There's a lot to be learned about grassroots democracy and the American political process from "Ballot Measure 9." Along with Colorado, Oregon served as a test case for a statewide referendum by "family values" groups fighting to amend the state constitution to prevent and revoke laws protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination.

In fact, Oregon's measure went further than Colorado's in its aggressive attempt to establish a link between homosexuality and pedophilia, labeling homosexuals as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, perverse." The Oregon Citizen's Alliance, which initiated the anti-gay ballot, even mandated that educational and other agencies teach and expose homosexuality in a denigrating way.

Producer/director MacDonald rep-

resents the hot issues from various perspectives, allowing equal time to gay activists and Lon Mabon, OCA's chair and Measure 9's sponsor, and other "moral majority" groups. Result is a balanced, if alarming, account of deep prejudices — concerning more than sexual orientation — and growing divisiveness ("a culture war") based on moral polarization.

MacDonald follows the different factions of the heated debate during an eight-month period, from April to the November elections. She records gay-rights rallies in which coming out is called "the most important act of our lives."

On the opposite side of the spectrum, OCA used its connections to powerful national organizations to promote its cause, sending anti-gay videos that, as one lesbian says, "took stereotypes and made them grotesque caricatures."

As the elections got closer, the campaign got nastier and nastier and resulted in a tremendous increase in anti-gay violence and harassment. Says a straight woman, "The scariest thing is that we got used to being scared."

In the end, Measure 9 was defeated (57% to 43%), but some alarming statistics are presented. The largest group voting "yes" were ages 30-44, citizens likely to have children in school, fearing that "homosexuality might be taught and transmitted." Interviews with straights reveal deeply ingrained homophobia based on ignorance. Says one: "If you talk about homosexuality in the open, people will become homosexuals."

Docu's treatment is appropriately serious, but there is also comic relief. Blamed for every possible sin and crime, one lesbian says: "It's not because I sleep with women that the world is falling apart."

Though the arguments are moral and intellectual, what makes "Ballot Measure 9" particularly engrossing is its ability to engage viewers viscerally in the lives of its central personalities. Despite the 1992 triumph, docu's urgency is undeniable, as its issues are far from being resolved. —Emanuel Levy