

NEW YORK TIMES

NYT Critics' Pick

This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of The Times.

Treating Oil Addiction

By JEANNETTE CATSOULIS

Published: September 18, 2009

“Fuel,” Josh Tickell’s unabashedly intimate, 11-years-in-the-making attack on America’s addiction to oil, is not so much a green documentary as a red, white and blue alarm. But if you can resist the urge to run for the exit, you may leave the theater feeling a lot more hopeful than when you went in.

A sustainable-energy evangelist whose church is a van that runs on grease, Mr. Tickell contends that the oil industry poisons our environment, corrupts our government and cooks our planet. Galvanized by a childhood spent among the oil refineries and pollution problems of Louisiana, Mr. Tickell was an early adopter of alternative fuels. But his exhaustively wide-ranging film is more than an expression of personal affront: though his mother, Deborah Dupré, suffered nine miscarriages (“Factor that into the cost of gasoline,” he says), “Fuel” seldom feels vindictive.

Thanks to an informative, buoyant tone and the director’s own restless intelligence, the film preaches to the unconverted with passion, energy and graphics so clear that they would make Al Gore weep all over his PowerPoint.

Bustling with politicians, scientists and card-carrying green celebrities, “Fuel” reveals the terrifying complexity of our energy crisis, as well as Mr. Tickell’s commitment to the truth. (The film was completely re-edited to include recent biodiesel controversies.)

“We cannot drill our way out of this,” says one of the film’s many experts; but as “Fuel” zealously argues, our chances of thinking our way out are very good indeed.

FUEL

Opens on Friday in New York and San Francisco and Berkeley, Calif.

Directed by Josh Tickell; written by Johnny O’hara; director of photography, James Mulryan; edited by Tina Imahara and Michael Horwitz; music by Ryan Demaree and Edgar Rothermich; produced by Greg Reitman, Dale Rosenbloom, Daniel Assael, Darius Fisher and Rebecca Harrell; released by Greenlight Theatrical. In Manhattan at the AMC Empire 25, 234 West 42nd Street. Running time: 1 hour 51 minutes. This film is not rated.

LOS ANGELES TIMES

'Fuel' to the Fire of Oil Addiction

By GARY GOLDSTEIN

"Fuel" is a vital, superbly assembled documentary that presents an insightful overview of America's troubled relationship with oil and how alternative and sustainable energies can reduce our country's -- and the world's -- addictive dependence on fossil fuels.

The film's structure is built around director-narrator Josh Tickell's personal journey of enlightenment, which started in childhood after moving with his family from idyllic Australia to murkier Louisiana, where he came to realize the oil-rich environment was being ravaged by the omnipotent petrochemical industry. Later, as a young adult, he spent 11 years crossing the country in his vegetable oil-powered "Veggie Van," promoting biofuels and compiling footage for what would become this impressively comprehensive film.

The events of Sept. 11 and Hurricane Katrina factor in both visually and thematically, providing provocative anchors for the movie's indictment of what Tickell believes is the Big Oil-cozy, ecologically indifferent Bush administration. Johnny O'Hara's WGA Award-nominated script doesn't dwell on muckraking, however; it's more focused on broadly inspiring viewers than preaching to the converted.

Interviews with a wide range of environmentalists, policy makers and educators, along with such "green" celebrities as Woody Harrelson, Sheryl Crow and Larry Hagman offer serious fuel for thought -- as well as for action. Smartly animated interstitials, memorable archival material and a lively soundtrack round out the fast-paced proceedings.

"Fuel." MPAA rating: unrated. Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes.

SEATTLE TIMES

Fuel" Filmmaker Josh Tickell Finds the "Wow" in Algae

By TOM KEOGH

Published: November 17, 2008

Filmmaker Josh Tickell talks about "Fuel," a new documentary chronicling America's dependence on oil — and alternatives for the future.

I can't remember the last time I was so excited about algae.

Consider: Algae can yield a biodiesel fuel so clean it's edible. And it grows in vast amounts very quickly.

What's more, according to filmmaker Josh Tickell's "Fuel," the United States could meet all its energy needs by dedicating 2 percent of its land mass to algae-fuel production.

Wow. And algae is just the tip of the clean-energy-sources-you've-never-heard-of iceberg explored in this movie. There are many more in "Fuel," a documentary that might, only a year ago, have been spitting in the prevailing wind of America's costly and destructive oil addiction.

But at this moment in the nation's history, with so many people experiencing a postelection sense of hope that yes — or at least maybe — we can rescue ourselves economically and environmentally, "Fuel," opening at the Varsity Friday, arrives at a propitious moment.

"The film was 11 years in the making, and turned out to be part of the zeitgeist," says Tickell, the day after a recent Seattle preview and panel discussion that included Congressman Jay Inslee.

"The move toward clean, renewable energy has been brewing a long time," Tickell says. "A lot of ordinary people — patriots — want it to happen. In order for the U.S. to move forward there has to be honesty. We have a bankrupt economy. We are losing the race to become sustainable through green energy. We're one of the few countries that do not reconcile lifestyle with environmental impact. We all need to understand what we're changing from in order to change into something better."

"Fuel" is partially focused on the historical synergy between the fortunes of oil companies and those of a U.S. auto industry that has long favored gas-guzzlers. Tickell explains in the film how the U.S. government has been subsidizing the production of sport-utility vehicles, but not more fuel-efficient cars, for years, ensuring that oil demand would remain high.

"Fuel" is the successor to "Fields of Fuel," a shorter work that won the Sundance Film Festival's 2008 Audience Award for Best Documentary. Tickell began filming in 1997 while driving his biodiesel-powered "Veggie Van" around the country and gaining press notice. (The van will motor into Seattle this week.) His passion for clean energy is rooted in childhood experience.

"I grew up in Louisiana and watched people suffer from pollution," Tickell says, referring to the environmental impact of the state's oil and oil-based biochemical industries. "I made a short film that played at festivals and was encouraged to turn it into a feature. It was an evolving, organic process that captured the growth of clean-energy research and development as well as public awareness."

The film's lengthy creation can also be seen, to positive effect, in the production itself. As years went by, "Fuel" adopted new filmmaking technologies, especially in powerful graphics.

"I really respect Josh and his team for their commitment," says Inslee, who is interviewed in "Fuel." "They've been at this for years. It was a lonely position. Josh's personal story and steely purpose are inspiring. A movie of this nature is worth its weight in gold, making people aware of how capable we are."

Tom Keogh: tomwkeogh@yahoo.com

DENVER POST

Personable Petro-doc Examines Cost of Energy

By LISA KENNEDY, Denver Post Film Critic

Published: March 20, 2009

One of the things biofuels have going for them is Josh Tickell.

In 1997, the energetic environmentalist hit America's roads in his "Veggie Van," an RV that ran on used cooking oil.

Since then, he's continued a mission to educate and cajole Americans into changing our petro dependency, even when events threatened his environmental evangelism.

After "Fields of Fuel" won the Sundance 2008 audience award, the director re-edited the film to address controversies that arose about the environmental and humanitarian impact of ethanol.

Renamed, reworked and smarter for it, "Fuel" arrives with a fully loaded screening at the Starz FilmCenter tonight (it runs through Thursday). Tickell will be on a panel with Greenprint Denver's Sabrina Williams and Jeff Probst, CEO of Golden-based Blue Sun Biodiesel, after the 7:10 p.m. screening.

Deeply personal and surprisingly personable, "Fuel" begins in Australia. As a boy, Tickell relocated with his family from Down Under to his mother's home state of Louisiana. Life in beautiful if contaminated bayou country made him hyperaware of the petrochemical industry and admittedly hostile to it.

There is plenty of damning material on the oil companies' toxic contributions to local environments. Yet, one of the refreshing traits of this action-nudging documentary is Tickell's willingness to wrestle his own biases.

Tickell and writer Johnny O'Hara make a pragmatic case that one solution can't cure our energy woes. With candor, the doc often lets a nagging question cloud hope: Can energy ever be consequence-free?

For each familiar plunge into disaster — the Iraq war, 9/11, Katrina — there's a more revelatory moment spent with visionaries, local and global. "Fuel" boasts an all-star cast of usual suspects like Sheryl Crow and Woody Harrelson.

But the real stars are folks like Van Jones, founder of Green For All, an organization linking green jobs to poverty eradication. Or Tri-State Biodiesel honcho Brent Baker and his excited tanker driver Wayne Barnes. Or third-generation oil and gas man Gordon LeBlanc, CEO of PetroSun, who is committed to biofuel for the future of his kids and their children.

ARIZONA REPUBLIC

'Fuel'

By KERRY LENGEL

Published: April 10, 2009

The slick documentary "Fuel" is the unofficial sequel to Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth." Besides global warming, it adds toxic waste and Mideast bloodshed to the indictment against our "addiction to oil," but spends more of its time discussing solutions.

One solution in particular: biodiesel, which has been the personal crusade of activist Josh Tickell, who also is the film's director and "star." In the '90s, Tickell crisscrossed the country in his Veggie Van, towing a Green Grease Machine that converted vegetable oil from fast-food fryers into fuel.

Tickell has gone out of his way to make his environmental sermon watchable, with colorful cinematography, spiffy graphics, celebrities - Julia Roberts, Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson - and left-wing intellectuals, including Naomi Klein and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

The broad outline of the argument is pretty familiar, and it's unlikely to convince anyone who doesn't already accept the core premise: that our petroleum-based economy is unsustainable and endangers our national security and the planet itself. But there are many interesting facts here. For example, "biodiesel" isn't an innovation at all: The original diesel engine ran on peanut oil. And did you know that Henry Ford built an ethanol infrastructure for his cars that was shattered, not by market competition from gasoline but by Prohibition?

Tickell gets points for intellectual honesty for directly addressing critics who are concerned that increased use of biofuels will impact the global food supply, possibly pricing poor countries out of the market for such staples as corn. He doesn't dismiss the argument but offers some next-generation technological solutions, from algae farms in the desert to "vertical farms" in the cities.

The utopia he envisions couldn't be as easy to achieve as his motivational film implies. But it's worth thinking about.

Reach the reporter at kerry.lengel@arizonarepublic.com or 602-444-4896.

SANTA MONICA DAILY PRESS

A Fuel Good Movie

By JACK NEWORTH

Published: March 20, 2009

I'll be honest, this hasn't been such a great week. Then again, it wasn't so great for Bernie Madoff, who's now about as popular as Hannibal Lecter. Nor for bombastic TV stock analyst Jim Cramer, who was "ripped a new one" on John Stewart's "Daily Show." Nor for Bristol Palin who broke up with Levi Johnston saying he's "too immature." Levi's 19, an unwed father, has no job, but goes to the gym every day.

...

My malaise was thankfully snapped by watching "Fuel," a documentary playing at the Santa Monica AMC. Even though our environment is eroding faster than anyone predicted (plus eight years of Bush inaction) director/activist Josh Tickell is contagiously optimistic about what each of us can do to help save the planet (unless you're too busy).

Tickell, who has an office on Main Street, was an activist before becoming a filmmaker, but is remarkably adept at the latter. "Fuel" is filled with enthusiasm, humor, and compelling commentary from, among others: Richard Branson, Larry Hagman, Woody Harrelson, Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson (who tours in a bio-diesel bus which purportedly smells like Kentucky Fried Chicken out the back and Maui-Wowie out the front).

After writing two books on alternative energy, Tickell wanted to reach a larger audience. Following "An Inconvenient Truth," he decided to make a movie. Impressively, in 2008, "Fuel," won Sundance's "Best Documentary Audience Award Winner."

"Fuel" is a very personal story for Tickell, who grew up in the oil-polluted region of Louisiana. In making the documentary he spent two years in a Veggie Van, a Winebago converted to bio-diesel. To get interviews for "Fuel," he drove 2,500 miles cross-country on only used cooking oil.

"Change your fuel, change the world" is Tickell's rallying cry. In the film we encounter many intelligent, dedicated people who are working tirelessly to develop alternative energy, including converting algae and waste into clean power. (Other than bombs, we don't manufacture much in America anymore, but we're number one in waste.)

If Al Gore is the scholarly professor, Tickell is Johnny Appleseed, joyfully spreading green energy. Go to: www.thefuelmovie.com, or, better yet, "Fuel" is at the AMC Santa Monica for at least one more week. Before it's too late (literally and metaphorically) to go see, what many called, the "most hopeful movie of 2008." Be forewarned. It might just make an activist out of you.

Meanwhile, I've misplaced my phone, once again. As I look under the couch I ask myself, "If I were a phone where would I be?" My answer is, "Just so long as it's not in the toilet."

SEATTLE POST INTELIGENCER

Practical and Inspirational, 'Fuel' Faces the Facts of the Energy Crisis

By SEAN AXMAKER

Published: November. 20, 2008

"Change your fuel, change the world."

The rallying cry of director/activist Joshua Tickell's "Fuel" is not as catchy as "Save the cheerleader, save the world," but it is significantly more relevant to actually saving the planet.

"Fuel" is upfront about the politics of energy and the power of big oil in government and business; understanding that is the preamble to how to effect change in practical terms. Tickell challenges Americans to take a cue from Europeans, who have pushed their governments to make energy independence a priority.

Tickell spent years promoting biofuels and energy conservation by driving around the country in his "Green Machine," a biodiesel van powered by reclaimed grease from fast-food restaurants. He turned to film to reach a wider audience.

It turns out he's an adept filmmaker. "Fuel" is a rousing documentary on the real costs of petrochemical dependence and the practical alternatives within reach. It confronts the debate over the efficiency of biofuels with the honesty and candor of a research scientist faced with contradictory data. It leads Tickell to extraordinary new possibilities.

Most of all, "Fuel" is about making a difference. Tickell's enthusiasm and encouragement left me inspired rather than discouraged, empowered with practical knowledge in how I can make a difference as a consumer, as a voter and as an inhabitant of the planet.

Sean Axmaker can be reached via e-mail at seanax@hotmail.com.

RELATED CONTENT: An interview with filmmaker Josh Tickell

HONALULU ADVISOR

Fuel that Goes Green

By ASHLEE DUENAS, Advisor Staff Writer

Published: June 22, 2009

Cars running on vegetable oil, buildings 30 stories high filled with growing fruits and veggies, and algae cultivated as biofuel in the middle of the desert? Those strategies may be key to saving the environment.

Honolulu has the resources to participate, according to the makers of "Fuel," a film advocating for more sustainable strategies. They're bringing the film to the Blaisdell Concert Hall on Friday with the aim of converting Islanders to this activist green mindset.

Cars and used veggie oil? Check. Plenty of buildings? Check. Algae? We may not be the middle of the desert, but we're surrounded by the stuff. So what's stopping us from switching over from limited and hazardous resources to clean and renewable energy?

With its can-do message, "Fuel" has won over critics and audiences worldwide. It won the prize for best documentary at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. And on Thursday, director Josh Tickell was recognized at an awards ceremony sponsored by the Intergovernmental Renewable Energy Organization at the United Nations' headquarters in New York, for his "global advancement in alternative energy solutions."

That fits snugly into Tickell's plan.

"I wanted to make a movie that both cataloged and catalyzed the green energy movement — a snapshot, if you will, that simultaneously ignited the next phase of action," he said. "I wanted people to walk out of the theater with an understanding of the issues and an empowerment to change the course of history."

Tickell uses tactics including shock, humor, flashy yet simple animations and inspirational music to capture the audience's attention.

"Energy is fundamental to our survival and continuation as a species," the filmmaker said. "If we do not deal with the energy issues we face, our species will follow."

He has traveled across the Mainland in a "Veggie Van" run solely on biodiesel fuel, and he stood in the middle of a Manhattan business district — symbolic of change-resistant corporate America — with cardboard signs saying, "Change your life, Change your fuel" and "Biodiesel: No War Required."

Tickell, who grew up in Louisiana near a concentration of oil refineries that thicken the air with emissions, attributes his mother's frequent illnesses during his youth to the petroleum industry. Although he pinpoints his hatred of oil companies as a starting point in the making of "Fuel," Tickell also considers the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina pivotal points in his journey. In his view, the Sept. 11 attacks should serve as a call to develop sustainable energy, while Katrina is a stark illustration that America is not prepared for the climate effect of global warming.

After Hurricane Katrina, he said, "I stopped fighting from anger, and started looking for partners."

A star-studded cast helps Tickell convey his message in "Fuel." Julia Roberts, Willie Nelson, Sheryl Crow and Woody Harrelson, along with leaders of the biofuel and alternative energy industry, address the effect petrol-based fuels can have on the environment, and on humans directly. The guests offer proposed solutions alongside their facts.

"On O'ahu, statewide even, we are utterly dependent on imported petroleum. We have so many resources to tap into here, so it's a huge opportunity for us. We're missing out on using renewable local resources," said Jeff Mikulina, executive director of Blue Planet Foundation, one of the organizations sponsoring the premiere.

"Anything that will help facilitate our discussion about a clean energy future, we're in favor of," said Mikulina. "We're always looking for new and exciting ways to talk about clean energy."

"Fuel" begins with an introduction to biofuels, goes on to depict America as "addicted" to oil, then offers solutions to "rehabilitate" the country.

Just when you thought you've learned all you can, the movie gives you 10 simple, direct ways to go green, along with the credits.

"The main thing is to get people excited about clean energy," Mikulina said. "We want to keep people concerned and educated about our current situation. Energy is something that we take so for granted, we only pay attention to how much it costs. We don't stop to think about the environment."

According to Tickell, film editors have been working on cutting "Fuel" into a 45-minute version to be distributed to schools. A television series is also in the works.

HONOLULU WEEKLY

Fuel for Thought

By ALIA WONG

Published: June, 24 2009

A new documentary takes a look at our reliance on imported oil

Fuel / In a time when there are waiting lists for Priuses and birthday gifts in the form of carbon offsets, any discussion of fuel has dark—even ominous—overtones. So, when Fuel is the title of a documentary, one expects a bleak, disturbing (remember the frog in *An Inconvenient Truth*?) and guilt-tripping film about how we continue to mistreat our planet. Except Fuel doesn't really do that; in fact, it doesn't do that at all. Fuel is about solutions.

“*An Inconvenient Truth* shows the problems,” said director Josh Tickell, when asked how he would compare his own film with Al Gore's now-legendary documentary. “Fuel shows the solutions.” And the film's solutions seek to empower viewers, to give them ideas and a constructive, positive dose of reality. The film has been applauded in the media and among both environmental gurus and Hollywood celebrities for its uplifting message. It has won numerous awards, including the 2008 Sundance Audience Award. Fuel highlights the U.S. addiction to and dependency on oil and aims to inspire its viewers to look toward other, more sustainable energy sources. Tickell carefully sketches the solutions to changing our relationship with oil and demonstrates that innovation and resilience can be a part of our environmental future. Fuel avoids playing the blame game, and instead opts to concentrate its energy (no pun intended) on looking forward. “We need access to information, a shift in perspective,” Tickell said. “Fuel fills in the blanks.” And, with a mixture of reputedly impressive animation, a sizable lineup of familiar faces (Julia Roberts, Sheryl Crow, Neil Young and more) and the necessary cold, hard facts, Tickell's documentary confidently addresses one of today's most focal crises.

It's a crisis that is somewhat magnified here in Hawaii, where we have felt increasingly guilty of our dependence on foreign fossil fuel. Considering the pride we take in what seems like an inherent environmentalism and a special relationship with the 'aina, it feels paradoxical that we get a bigger proportion of our energy from fossil fuel than any other state in the country. Both grassroots notables and international powerhouses have taken the lead in alleviating Hawaii's reliance on fuel, but many of us feel a little hopeless and can't help but wondering, “How do we even begin to clean up this mess?”

“It's very ironic,” noted Tickell. But he also stressed that when what he calls Hawaii's “naturalistic sentiment” is fully exploited, it could put us at the head of the environmental game—especially when it comes to algae.

Tickell is a huge advocate of the microorganism, which stars in Fuel (and also happens to thrive in Hawaii).

“The potential for algae as a renewable resource in Hawaii is huge,” he said. Thankfully, algae biofuel research is in the works here in the state, and Tickell intends to work with algae scientists when he visits Hawaii for his film's screening.

Green Earth Media hosts the Oahu premiere and, true to form, it will be making the entire event as sustainable as possible. That means carbon offsets, recycled paper for the program guide, sustainable vendors before the screening and, yes, promoting carpools and public transportation. Attendees are also encouraged to bring old telephone books and glossy magazines for recycling. There'll even be a VIP after party at Chef Ed Kenney's restaurant, Downtown. But more than anything, Tickell is excited for the Q&A session after the showing, which he likens to "a green town hall meeting."

Considering Fuel's emphasis on the "next steps" and its mission to encourage individuals to take the reins in moving toward complete self-sufficiency, a subsequent public exchange of ideas is perhaps imperative. "Come to the movie to talk with your community," he urges. "It's the community experience that's important."

Neil S. Blaisdell Concert Hall, 777 Ward Ave., Fri 6/26, 6:30pm, \$10, all seats are reserved,

BEND SOURCE WEEKLY

By RACHEL PURCELL, Advisor Staff Writer
Published: December 3, 2008

Winner of the Sundance Audience Choice Award and now being considered for an Academy Award nomination, *Fuel* is an amazing resource for those wishing to know more about the hottest issue of our time, energy independence. Not as sensational as a Michael Moore production (there is no equivalent to standing on a boat outside of Guantánamo Bay with a bullhorn demanding healthcare), it is far more practical and the main themes are knowledge and action.

Fuel is a comprehensive look at energy in America. A history of where we have been, our present predicament and a solution to our dependence on foreign oil, given an effort by the American people and our government. The film flows seamlessly through scientific data, facts, history and personal narrative and is never dull or overwhelming. Quite the opposite in fact, there is intrigue, conspiracy, murder, and greed, which is made all the more infuriating because this is not fiction.

With a Ron Howard-esque quality, Director Josh Tickell narrates, beginning with his childhood in Louisiana, the number one oil producing state. He speaks of family illnesses and his mother's nine miscarriages, and asks how do you calculate that into the cost of oil? He speaks of the environmental devastation of Hurricane Katrina, with an oil spill equal to that of Exxon Valdez, but never covered by any of the mainstream media. He is earnest and engaging, truly committed and passionate about biodiesel and making a difference without being overzealous or preachy.

The film is not exclusive to Josh Tickell's point of view, but is infused with appearances by celebrities and experts, most poignantly Robert Kennedy, Jr. in one of his only public appearances since being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He points out that today in America we have put oil in front of the Bill of Rights. Also appearing in *Fuel*, are Willie Nelson and Neil Young who give concerts at truck stops to encourage the use of biodiesel.

The film has a sense of urgency. The consequences of our oil addiction will lead to the coming crisis of our lifetime and can no longer be ignored. The filmmaker hammers home the importance of demanding alternative fuel from our leaders. The world is running out of oil, and as singer/songwriter Sheryl Crow states in the film, "We won't really know what war is until the oil is gone."

The greatest thing about this film is that it offers hope, a vision of a future without oil wars and environmental disasters that is powered by renewable energy.

The message here is that if we change our fuel, we can change our world, and it's one worth heeding.

PORTLAND MERCURY

That Which We Desire

By AMY J. RUIZ

I consider myself a reasonably well-educated person when it comes to peak oil, climate change, and alternative forms of energy. So Fuel—a film by Joshua Tickell, who's personally invested his life in biodiesel and conducting an "intervention" into our oil addiction—didn't strike me as a must-see film at first. Narrated by Tickell (whose heavy-handed storytelling was accurately described as "schmaltzy" by a woman leaving the theater ahead of me), the first three-quarters of Fuel mirror other recent enviro-docs like An Inconvenient Truth—outlining his crusade to save the planet, Tickell tells us that we have to find another way to fuel our lives. Yeah, no duh.

Tickell's answer is biodiesel. But wait: Isn't biodiesel the stuff that's pushing out food crops on the world's finite arable land, and driving up food prices? It's not like there's enough McDonald's fry grease to fill all of our tanks. This cannot possibly be the answer.

But then Tickell redeems himself: The last quarter of the film is astounding, explaining how biodiesel from algae and from trees that can be grown in the crappiest of soils might really be the answer. Put aside your green Portlander know-it-all attitude (ahem), do yourself a favor, and go check it out. Q&A with director Joshua Tickell during evening screenings on Friday, November 14 and Saturday, November 15. See Movie Times for details.

Official Site: thefuelfilm.com

Director: Joshua Tickell

Writer: Johnny O'Hara

Cast: Richard Branson, Barbara Boxer, George W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, Sheryl Crow, Larry David, Laurie David and Deborah Dupre

The Washington Post

Documentaries' Message: Use Our Earth Wisely

By DESSON THOMSON

Published: September 18, 2009

Whether we're watching "Star Wars," "The Lord of the Rings" or two new eco-documentaries about breaking our dependency on fossil fuels, the dramatic situation is essentially the same. The forces of evil are gathering. Only a coalition of the good, the resolute and the pure of heart can save us from perpetual darkness.

Of course, the battleground in "Fuel" and "Earth Days" -- both opening Friday -- is not Middle Earth or some distant galaxy. It's the real world. And the forces of good are citizens who measure the hero's call to action in ecological terms. For them, the Holy Grail is sustainable living -- free of the black, viscous stuff that has prompted wars, polluted the atmosphere and made consumer gluttons of us all.

"America is addicted to oil," President George W. Bush says in both movies, his famous pronouncement serving as their collective dramatic linchpin. The implications are clear: The world in general -- and America in particular -- needs to kick its habit and transition to a methadone cocktail of wind power, solar energy and biofuels. It's time to pour veggie gloop into our Priuses and cruise past acres of soybean fields.

Yes, some viewers may find this utopian business -- especially in "Fuel" -- amusing, goofy or even annoying. After all, the central figure in that movie is Josh Tickell, a bright-eyed crusader whose bright-eyed zeal and in-your-face advocacy suggest a youthful Michael Moore. He's the one with the veggie gloop.

"Fuel," which Tickell directed and co-wrote, revisits his worldwide tour to promote biodiesels in his Veggie Van. The movie segues from his personal narrative (his mother who lived near oil refineries in Louisiana suffered nine miscarriages) to a citizen's clarion call for biofuels and other non-oil forms of energy. It is stylistically breezy but deeply sincere, as Tickell offers a thoughtful, well-researched argument for alternative energy.

At times, the movie suffers from that Moore-ish exuberance, which puts a distractingly partisan bent on the proceedings. (The Bush family dabbled in oil! Cheney met with corporate heads of oil companies just before 9/11! The oil industry bankrolls politicians to maintain the carbon-based status quo!) But there's something boyishly appealing about his spirit. And it's clear that Tickell has reaped results. Bill Clinton selected Tickell's Veggie Van Organization as part of his Global Initiative on Climate Change. And the movie, which won the audience award for documentary at last year's Sundance Film Festival, rolls out testimonials from celebrities he has galvanized, including Woody Harrelson, Sheryl Crow and Willie Nelson.

Where "Fuel" follows Moore's zippier, me-centric style, "Earth Days" treads a more traditional path. British-born documentary veteran Robert Stone outlines the birth, growth and development of the environmental movement with imaginatively culled archival footage of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The movie revisits many milestones in the saga, including the founding of Earth Day; President Richard Nixon's progressive legislation in the 1970s for clean air, water and endangered species; and the influence of books such as Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring."

But Stone offers more than a snappily edited history lesson. We are privy to rewarding conversations with nine individuals who were in some way influential and who charted their personal journeys of consciousness in the allegorical clash between industry and environmentalism. They include former interior secretary Stewart Udall, Earth Day co-chairman Pete McCloskey and biologist Paul Ehrlich, author of "The Population Bomb."

Like Tickell, they were young men and women determined to make a difference. And it's instructive to hear them speak of the changes they have seen, from the 1950s of mass production and suburban expansion, through the turbulence of the gasoline shortages of the 1970s, and into the present. Everyone has a different, yet connective story. McCloskey (R), a former congressman, and the late former senator Gaylord Nelson (D) recall how they came to co-chair Earth Day. Udall recounts how, as interior secretary, he opposed a bid to build dams in the Grand Canyon. And renewable-energy activist Denis Hayes speaks of how exploitation of fossil fuels has "violated the rules of ecology."

"Earth Days" feels like a prolonged campfire conversation, filled with weathered, measured talk about holistic thinking and finding a new perspective. It's time, they all essentially say, to redefine every component of contemporary ecology, from industrial production to consumer behavior. "Fuel" is more spring-loaded, a perkier, user-friendlier appeal to audiences.

Yet both movies have the same essential purpose: to create a mythological urgency about our moral purpose on the planet. They ask us to think differently about the way the world does business. They invite us -- no matter what our political perspective -- to listen to their commentary. To debate, disagree or applaud. But not to be indifferent. They have a point about getting us involved. Unlike those fictional sci-fi blockbusters, the potentially disastrous consequences won't go away with the closing credits.

Fuel (111 minutes at Landmark's E Street Cinema) is unrated and contains nothing objectionable.

Earth Days (102 minutes at Landmark's E Street Cinema) is unrated and contains passing nudity.

Time Out New York

Fuel Film Review

By AARON HILLIS

The impotence of environmental-advocacy docs, even in an age when green has become chic, is that they preach to the choir and too often feel like homework—though *Fuel* is at least more valuable than the eco-martyrdom of *No Impact Man*. Joshua Tickell's inconvenient truth is that oil companies are the devil, biodiesel is an imperfect but good start, algae is awesome, and so is Willie Nelson. It's a slickly enjoyable production (if unfocused and bloated), and his bullet-point tips are persuasive; but dude, there are better ways to humanize these issues than crying on camera.

The Sundance Institute

Fields of Fuel Film Review

By CAROLINE LIBRESCO

Most Americans know we've got a problem: an addiction to oil that taxes the environment, entangles us in costly foreign policies, and threatens the nations long-term stability. But few are informed or empowered enough to do much about it. Enter Josh Tickell, an expert young activist who, driven by his own emotionally charged motives, shuttles us on a revelatory, whirlwind journey to unravel this addiction from its historical origins to political constructs that support it, to alternatives available now and the steps we can take to change things.

Tickell tracks the rising domination of the petrochemical industry from Rockefeller's strategy to halt ethanol use in Ford's first cars to the mysterious death of Rudolph Diesel at the height of his biodiesel engines popularization, to our government's choice to declare war after 9/11, rather than wean the country from fossil fuel. Never minimizing the complexities of ending oil dependence, Tickell uncovers a hopeful reality pointing toward a decentralized, sustainable energy infrastructure like big rigs tanking up on biofuel at Carls Corner Texas truck stop, a new Brooklyn biodiesel plant serving three states, a miraculous Arizona algae-based fuel farm, and the Swedish public voting to be petroleum free by 2020.

Sweeping and exhilarating, Tickell's passionate film goes beyond great storytelling; it rings out like a bell that stirs consciousness and makes individual action suddenly seem consequential.