

BLOGS & STORIES

Outing Sanctimonious Celebs

by Caryn James

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A hot new documentary by *Wag the Dog* director Barry Levinson tackles the ugly truth about celebrities' misguided political interventions.

We always knew that Obamamania would have to give way to realism, like it or not. And on the evidence of *PoliWood*, Barry Levinson's piercing new documentary about the mingling of politics and Hollywood, the director may be the ultimate realist for our media-centric, still-hopeful yet still-polarized age.

The film (which premiered Friday at the Tribeca Film Festival) first took shape when the Creative Coalition, the advocacy group of artists, asked Levinson to follow its members to the 2008 Democratic and Republican conventions and the inauguration. The project morphed so much it is now billed as "A Barry Levinson Film Essay," and a good thing it did. What might have been a valentine to an admirable group (snooze) is now an eye-opening meditation, with Levinson appearing on camera to frame trenchant questions about the "unholy alliance" as he calls it, of politics, celebrity, and media.



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“Everyone is selling something,” Levinson says matter-of-factly onscreen. “And that’s the democracy we have today.”

It's territory Levinson understands well, having directed *Wag the Dog*, the prescient 1997 movie in which a political strategist wages a bogus war entirely on television to distract the nation from a White House sex scandal. *PoliWood* plays as if Levinson were explaining how we got to be such a *Wag the Dog* country—he casts TV as the villain—and why the media hounds keep getting more rabid.

The camera watches as Spike Lee challenges Gov. David Paterson about funding arts education in New York and actor Giancarlo Esposito speaks movingly about his mother's emotional breakdown and the need for better mental-health care. Anne Hathaway plays the ingenue, worried about how to combine stardom with political responsibility.

But the two episodes of high drama come from events Levinson himself set in motion. At the Democratic convention in Denver, he asked pollster Frank Luntz to run a seminar advising Creative Coalition members how to convey their support for issues such as arts education more effectively. When Luntz mildly suggests that the actors tone down any in-your-face rhetoric, perhaps use language to sway opponents not antagonize them, actor Josh Lucas turns as red-faced as a kid whose toy has been taken away on the playground; he's indignant at being told what to say. Actress Gloria Reuben actually compares Luntz's advice to stomping on her First Amendment rights. Huh? This from people who make a living creating images.

Here we get an illuminating peek inside the bubble at least some stars occupy. Susan Sarandon is a voice of reason as she patiently explains, in what amounts to a Bush flashback, “I don't talk about impeachment, I talk about accountability.”

Levinson took a more conciliatory approach during the Republican convention in St. Paul, Minnesota, asking Luntz to bring together actors and ordinary citizens to talk across the Hollywood-Main Street divide. Face to face with actors including Hathaway, Tim Daly, and Ellen Burstyn, the people in St. Paul (not all of them Republicans) were—what's

the opposite of star-struck? They practically spit venom. They are furious that showbiz millionaires get what one man calls “undue influence”; they angrily call the stars arrogant and out of touch; another man accuses them of not allowing everyday people to think for themselves. (Maybe he thought he was in a sci-fi mind-meld movie.)

The political gulf between Middle America and Hollywood is hardly a new idea. What’s fresh is this closeup view, so visceral it finally makes that abstraction real (especially to some of us in celeb-central New York).

Levinson, who grew up with television and worked in TV in his early years, says he thinks the medium is responsible for the country’s polarization and inability to engage in real discussion. “Every great invention has a downside,” he told *The Daily Beast*. “It’s easy to say the automobile is a great invention, but it also pollutes, it can kill people. Television is more subtle, and the changes that have taken place have forced everybody into an entertainment mode,” which means that news programs thrive on heated right-left battles, and the country also takes sides.

On screen, Levinson is an effective guide because he doesn’t sound like a curmudgeon, just a clear-eyed analyst as he describes a tangle of insidious forces: Celebrities need the media to spotlight their causes, the media need celebrities to get ratings, and politicians need both. “Everyone is selling something,” Levinson says matter-of-factly onscreen. “And that’s the democracy we have today.”

MSNBC commentator Lawrence O’Donnell is a lucid presence in the film, saying that television news chases ratings and uses showbiz tactics as calculatedly as *American Idol*. News programs are “trying to get you to fall in love with the star, the character they’ve put as the star of this show,” he says, a observation bound to cause a jolt of recognition in Maddow and Olbermann lovers as well as O’Reilly fanatics.

After the film’s premiere on Friday, O’Donnell moderated a panel discussion with Levinson, Luntz and some actors from the film, including Lucas, Burstyn, and Tim Daly, co-president of the Creative Coalition. The conversation offered just a few sidelights. Asked during a Q&A how many Republicans were in the Creative Coalition, Daly said, “It’s pretty obvious there’s a low, low number of Republicans.” Levinson could have used a line like that in the movie, instead of trying to emphasize that the group is nonpartisan (technically true, but it sounds disingenuous).

Luntz good-naturedly said it was his fault the communications seminar was a disaster. He should have begun by telling the actors he supports arts education and wanted to help, instead of assuming that, like the politicians who hire him, they came prepared to listen to his advice. (Now there’s a question: Who listens less, movie stars or politicians?)

Because the film only takes us to the brink of the Obama years, I asked Levinson if the Creative Coalition might be more effective in lobbying for its causes now than under Bush. “They can talk to anyone they want to on the Hill—that doesn’t mean it’s going to be easier to pass a bill,” he said. “I’m both an optimist and a pessimist. There are millions of people in Washington, D.C., excited about this new presidency and maybe a change will begin. But I have this anxiety it won’t.”

We could really use a smart film that explores the nature and future of political celebrity in our all-access media age. *PoliWood* isn’t quite that movie. It suggests that presidential candidates have to be as telegenic as Obama today, but the problem is more complicated—it’s not as if rock-star charisma is easy to find. And Caroline Kennedy, a political celebrity if anyone is, hasn’t been able to parlay her inherited fame into public office—is that about the limit of fame or just about her?

PoliWood is a great place to start that kind of conversation. Levinson may not always see the bright side, but that makes his voice just right for this next stage of the Obama years—reminding us that realism can be tough medicine.

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