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THIS WEEK



Linda Kiewer/Film Forum

Equal Rights Fray Demonstrators at a rally in Portland, Ore., in October 1992 are seen in Heather MacDonald's "Ballot Measure 9," which chronicles the battle over equal rights for homosexuals. The documentary, which was shown at the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival earlier this month and was an award winner at the 1995 Sundance Film Festival, opens on Wednesday at Film Forum 1.

NEW YORK

Ballot Measure 9—Through 7/4. A smart, angry documentary about the struggles in Oregon over the anti-human-rights initiative Ballot Measure 9, which would have denied equal rights to gays and lesbians. Heather MacDonald's film doesn't pull any fast ones on the Oregon Citizens' Alliance—the backers of the campaign—she simply lets them speak their piece. They do the rest. The film shows the frightening rise in violence directed against the people who actively fought the measure, as well as the frighteningly clever distortions and lies the Citizens' Alliance employed. Though it's filled with profiles of bright, articulate people who risked their lives to speak out, the movie is most fascinating when it lets the confused, often poorly educated folk on the opposite side express their frustration—people like the woman who can't see why she should let some homosexual get child-care leave from work “just like that” when it took her so long to get that right; the teenage boy who doesn't think beating up a gay guy is like beating up a real person; and the kid who thinks they should all be shipped off to some other state. (1 hr. 12 mins.; NR) *Film Forum*.

MOVIE REVIEW

At Oregon Polls, A Confrontation With Homophobia

★★½ **BALLOT MEASURE 9.** (Unrated) Heather MacDonald's detailed and well-crafted documentary about the 1992 campaign to legalize discrimination against homosexuals in Oregon. 1:12 (profanity, adult content). At Film Forum, 209 W. Houston St., Manhattan.

By Jack Mathews

STAFF WRITER

IN THE MIDST of the acrimony in Heather MacDonald's "Ballot Measure 9," a solidly crafted documentary chronicling the 1992 campaign to legalize discrimination against homosexuals in Oregon, there is a gentle confrontation between a lesbian woman and an elderly man trying to convince her that God can show her the way to a better life.

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

"Well, there's your problem," he answers.

It would be hard to find a simpler declaration of the issues that prompted Ballot Measure 9, fomented months of heated debate and caused anti-gay crime to jump four-fold in a state once regarded as a model of political moderation. There is the sinking feeling on the religious right that mainstream America is beginning to accept behavior the Bible calls an abomination and that laws protecting the rights of homosexuals are tantamount to an endorsement of that lifestyle.

Figuring something had to be done to reverse the tide of acceptance, a born-again Christian named Lon

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Mabon, taking inspiration from Patrick Buchanan's declaration of cultural war at the '92 Republican Convention, crafted and promoted a referendum asking Oregon voters to compel government agencies and schools to recognize homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse," and to treat it as such.

Mabon, being a little perverse himself, hooked his campaign to a few spectacular lies — equating homosexuality with pedophilia and sadomasochism, labeling anti-discrimination laws as "special rights" for gays — and whipped up a statewide froth of homophobia.

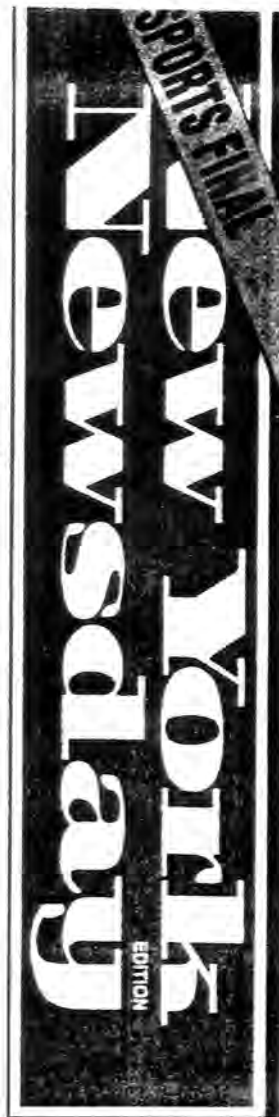
The referendum ultimately failed, 57 to 43 percent, but the 14 percent margin of reason could hardly be taken as a victory by gay activists. All they accomplished, one of their leaders rightly concluded on election night, was to "hold on" to rights most Americans take for granted. And Mabon's Oregon Citizens

Alliance, bolstered by its strong support and the passage of a similar referendum in Colorado that year, has since engineered local anti-gay laws in 21 of Oregon's 36 counties.

"Ballot Measure 9" is splendid advocacy journalism. MacDonald is obviously on the side of the "No on 9" campaign, and as ignorant, mean-spirited or misguided as the ballot proponents appear, they are given ample opportunity to state their case. Some of the pro-9ers, like the old man lecturing the lesbian, seem genuinely concerned for the fate of souls. But most are driven by the rank emotions of repulsion and fear.

In listening to these angry, frightened people, two thoughts kept occurring to me. One, how similar homophobia is to anti-Communist hysteria (they're trying to recruit our children!). And two, how wonderful it would be if there were a magic pill, like Prozac, that would short-circuit the mental wiring compelling so many people to dwell on what others may be doing behind closed doors. ■

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NEW YORK POST

LATE CITY FINAL

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21, 1995

A vote to back 'Ballot'

By THELMA ADAMS

IT can't happen here — or can it?

Heather MacDonald's suspenseful documentary "Ballot Measure 9" crisply demonstrates that the war over gay rights rages on. Her subject is a 1992 Oregon

BALLOT MEASURE 9

★ ★ ★

Directed by Heather MacDonald. Running time: 72 minutes. Unrated. At Film Forum, 109 W. Houston St., at Sixth Avenue. Through July 4.

anti-gay initiative sponsored by the Oregon Citizen's Alliance (OCA).

Ballot Measure 9 lumped homosexuality with pedophilia, sadism and masochism, calling it "abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse." Not only did the

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amendment, which eventually was defeated at the polls, move to end anti-discrimination protection for gays, it proposed curtailing the civil rights and equal protection under the law of Oregon's homosexuals. This was a law intent on running Heather and her two mommies out of the Beaver State.

The documentary, which shared the audience award at this year's Sundance Film Festival and opens today at Film Forum, takes a pro-gay stance without being dogmatic. What separates this film from the pack is the way it delivers a slice of the contemporary American culture wars by concentrating on a specific regional struggle.

What the OCA's Lon Mabon describes as a "battle between good and evil" becomes a life-or-death fight in Oregon's once-sleepy gay community. The movie's scariest element is that, as the OCA and gay activists fought for the hearts and minds of Oregon voters, violence against homosexuals rose to unprecedented heights. Although it tends to make the OCA leaders look like snake-oil salesmen, the movie does give voice to the fears and prejudices of the "family values" pack.

MacDonald's cool, straightforward style never distracts from this chilling real-life story. Says mild-mannered Scott Seibert, gay activist and former Marine, "Oregon is a beautiful state. I truly believe if it can happen in Oregon, it can happen anywhere."

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FILM REVIEW

How Numbers Count, in Countering a Minority

By JANET MASLIN

In her no-frills documentary about the bitter fight over Oregon's 1992 anti-gay ballot initiative, Heather MacDonald examines the many faces of prejudice. There is the schoolboy who declares, "Never liked them, never will," although he says he doesn't know any homosexuals. There is the woman who frets that "they could persuade one of my grandchildren to become a homosexual." There is the authoritative-sounding man interviewed on television who says it is a fact that 28 percent of homosexuals have performed sodomy with more than 1,000 partners. There is the grandmotherly lady who shakes her head and says, "It's just not human for people to act that way."

And there are the political organizers dedicated to capitalizing on such sentiments as fiercely as they can. "Ballot Measure 9," witnesses the escalating battle between gay rights advocates, who were clearly caught off guard by the vehemence

of their enemies, and the extremely well-organized forces of the religious right. Lon Mabon, the chairman of the Oregon Citizens Alliance and a leader of the movement to prevent and revoke laws banning anti-gay discrimination, speaks with typical single-mindedness in describing the fight as "a simple battle between good and evil."

Since Ms. MacDonald makes no pretense of even-handedness, she readily shows Mr. Mabon in a disparaging light. But the scenes in which he voices his opinions in small, half-empty rooms are dangerously misleading because the Citizens Alliance efforts proved so effective. "Ballot Measure 9" is best watched as a cautionary study of why this group was able to find such strength in numbers, and what to expect from similar local ballot referendums that have since cropped up other states. It also sees beyond the statistics and finds vivid, sometimes disturbing human dimensions on both sides of this struggle.

"Ballot Measure 9," which opens

Opponents of Ballot Measure 9 were quick to identify a larger threat to individual freedoms within the alliance's campaigning, and their cause galvanized representatives of many different minority groups. Ms. MacDonald notes that the Ku Klux Klan was instrumental in passing an anti-Catholic school statute in the 1920's in Oregon (it was quickly overturned), and that conflicts like the present one are not unknown there. One by-product of the Ballot Measure 9 fight, according to Portland's chief of police and other speakers, has been a sharp increase in anti-gay violence in the state.

Using straightforward video camerawork that still captures the expansive beauty of the state, Ms. MacDonald documents some of these violent acts. Her film describes arson, petty acts of sabotage and even attacks on trees and animals as part of the pre-election activity in 1992. She also films ugly graffiti in a Roman Catholic church and plays back the voices of obscene phone callers. And she presents Mr. Mabon's opinion on

this subject: "I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of the hate crimes — in fact, I know a lot of the hate crimes — are perpetrated by the homosexual community as a media tool."

One of the lasting messages of "Ballot Measure 9," which won the audience award for best documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival, is that the effectiveness of media tools should never be underestimated. The Citizens Alliance's lurid descriptions of homosexuals, from talk of coprophilia to flaming Mardi Gras-type parade scenes, had a strong impact. Ballot Measure 9 lost by a 57 percent-43 percent margin, but many of the "No on 9" voters were over 60; the initiative had stronger support from voters in their 30's and 40's. Similar measures have passed the electoral test not only in Colorado and Cincinnati but in many Oregon communities since the 1992 election.

"Ballot Measure 9" shines a searchlight on these events and takes a sharp, galvanizing look at what they mean.

BALLOT MEASURE 9

Produced and directed by Heather MacDonald; director of photography, Ellen Hansen; edited by Ms. MacDonald and B. B. Jorissen; music by Julian Dylan Russell, Sunny McHale Skyedancer and Linda and the Family Values; released by Zeitgeist Films. At Film Forum, 209 Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 72 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Donna Red Wing, Kathleen Saadat, Scott Selbert, Jim Self, Elise Self, Cindy Paterson, Ann Sweet, Tom Potter, Lon Mabon, Bonnie Mabon, Scott Lively, Oren Camemish (as themselves).

today at the Film Forum, exposes not only rhetoric but also the more vicious aspects of its subject matter. The fight began at the level of semantics, with the alliance defining gay rights as "special rights" and exploiting the sense of privilege that implied. On the "No on 9" side, there were bumper stickers reading "Civil Rights Are Special."

The Gloved Ones

Never having been treated as an untouchable myself, I asked Mike Nelson what the experience was like. Mr. Nelson, a 31-year-old alderman in Carrboro, N.C., was one of the first to be greeted by Secret Service officers wearing gloves when he arrived at a White House briefing for gay elected officials last week.

"We were in disbelief," he said. "One of us kept saying over and over again, there must be some rational reason they're doing this, other than the one you might think." But then one guard said the blue rubber gloves were "for protection" — presumably against AIDS. "I was very angry," said the soft-spoken Mr. Nelson. "It was an offensive action ... and it betrayed a serious misunderstanding of how H.I.V. is transmitted."

Gay-bashing for fun and profit.

Mr. Nelson, a Democrat, was being polite. He might also have asked why the Secret Service automatically assumed that 45 gay men and women were carrying the virus, or why Bill Clinton, who didn't appear at the subsequent reception, did not rush to apologize for so ugly an incident in what is, after all, his home.

Then again, it's unfair to single out the Secret Service or the President for slights to gay people. Many politicians of all stripes would still rather duck or demagogue gay civil-rights issues, and the media, especially ratings-obsessed TV news magazines, often exacerbate the problem by sensationalizing any gay topic.

Last week Diane Sawyer not only devoted a whole hour to a coy pursuit of Michael Jackson's sexual orientation, but inflated the prurience of her efforts by refusing to ask the question directly or even say the word "gay" or "homosexual." Perhaps if other star TV interviewers had not erroneously implied some months ago that a bleeding Greg Louganis risked infecting a swimming pool, Secret Service officers wouldn't have been so quick to don gloves at the White House.

These incidents are benign, however, when set next to the right's exploitation of gay people for partisan

ends. Though Robert Mapplethorpe's "Perfect Moment" exhibition now dates back six years — into the Bush Administration — it is still Exhibit A for all attacks on Federal arts funding because the religious right has learned that gay-bashing, even more than Planned Parenthood-bashing, is the most productive fund-raising tool. Pat Robertson routinely targets homosexuals in Christian Coalition mailings; on the May 30 edition of his daily TV program, "The 700 Club," he aired a report sounding the alarm that a gay cabal is "rising to the tops of newsrooms" at ABC, CBS, NBC, USA Today, Knight-Ridder, The Washington Post and The New York Times, where it prepares to push "the homosexual agenda."

To see the impact of such invective on Americans, gay and straight, there is no better object lesson than a new documentary film titled "Ballot Measure 9," which opens at the Film Forum in New York this week and 40 other American cities soon after. "Ballot Measure 9" shows firsthand what happened in 1992 when a Christian Coalition offshoot, the Oregon Citizens Alliance, fought to ban all anti-discrimination protections for homosexuals. So successfully did this campaign open what one Oregonian called "a Pandora's box of hate" that there was more anti-gay violence reported in Portland that year than in Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco or New York.

"Ballot Measure 9" has a somewhat happy ending; the measure was defeated. But on the same 1992 Election Day, a similar initiative was passed in Colorado. Last week, in an action far more disturbing than any callous behavior by its Secret Service contingent, the Clinton White House declined to file a friend-of-the-court brief challenging the constitutionality of that Colorado law as it comes before the Supreme Court.

The fact is that gay people, simply because of who they are, can still be legally fired without other cause in most states in this country. The protections homosexuals seek, though misrepresented as "special rights" by the likes of the Christian Coalition, are merely basic civil rights. Some Republican leaders — William Weld and Christine Todd Whitman, for starters — have the guts to say so, but they can only go so far in a party whose leadership is in thrall to Mr. Robertson and Ralph Reed. If the Clinton Administration really cares about this fight, isn't it time to take off the gloves? □