

AFI DOCS FILM REVIEW: Ron Howardâ??s Gripping â??Rebuilding Paradiseâ?• Uplifts and Inspires

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Academy Award-winning filmmaker Ron Howardâ??s *Rebuilding Paradise*, a blistering Verite-style, National Geographic documentary, captures the devastation of the 2018 Camp Fire and the resiliency of Paradise, Calif., residents in the fireâ??s aftermath. Howard, one of Hollywoodâ??s most popular directors, also directed the 1991 fire drama *Backdraft.* Other Howard films include the Oscar-winning dramas *A Beautiful Mind* and *Apollo 13,* the hit comedies *Parenthood* and *Splash*, and the critically-acclaimed documentaries *Pavarotti* and *The Beatles: Eight Days A Week â?? The Touring Years.* Following the *Rebuilding Paradise* screening, Howard and Paradise residents, Michelle John and Woody Culleton, participated in a Q & A moderated by broadcast journalist Katy Tur, an NBC correspondent and anchor for MSNBC Live. Howard confided *Rebuilding Paradise* was his first venture into Verite-style filmmaking while the residents echoed the unimaginable magnitude of the fireâ??s devastation and that the images donâ??t reflect the fireâ??s â??uncomprehendableâ?• nature.

Rebuilding Paradise opens in dramatic fashion with narrative voice-over providing a weather update informing the viewer of a windy day and PG&E contemplating a pre-emptive decision to shut down the areaâ??s power grid. Large, fast-moving fire breaks out in the Feather River Canyon with four dozers, two water tenders, and four strike teams are deployed. Emergency calls are heard. School and hospital evacuations are taking place. Audible prayers are heard. And then, dashcam footage of a vehicle racing through the haze and fiery embers with diegetic radio communications juxtaposed against footage of a raging, massive wildfire *(*imagine *Lord of the Rings* Mountain of Fire) fueled by dry timber and blustering forty mile-per-hour winds reveal the genesis of a perfect firestorm. Non-diegetic music from the master composer, Hans Zimmer accompanies haunting, apocalyptic slow-motion frames of horses seeking freedom or at least a free-range amidst a claustrophobic smoke and death-seeking fire patches. The scene closes tinged in hope as a family escapes the area in their vehicle with exclamatory verbiage.

For me, this opening scene captured the essence of *Rebuilding Paradise*. As devastating as the fire and the footage were, the family breaks out and into blue skies with a redemptive foreshadowing.

Howard latches on to a group of Paradise residents who have a deeply rooted sense of place and home as they take the journey to rebuild Paradise one day at a time. There were plenty of setbacks and details of electrical equipment dating to 1921 still in use were trying and quite frustrating as the lawyers for PG&E managed to beat down a wrongful death case to manslaughter with a 3.5 million dollar fine for the lives of 85 Paradise residents who perished in the massive fire. Adeptly, Howard captures the real Erin Brockovich speaking to a group of Paradise residents. Brockovich was the subject of a 2000 bio-drama directed by Steven Soderbergh, starring Julia Roberts that dramatized Brockovichâ??s relentless and successful pursuit of justice for families who were victims of PG&E polluting their water supply.

Interestingly, Howard chose to tell the story in linear segments beginning with one month, then to three months, six months, culminating with nine months. On top of the eighty-five deaths, fifty thousand lives were displaced. One of the filmâ??s most compelling characters turned out to be the school psychologist, Carly Ingersoll, a young thirty-something, married woman who had decided to start a family with her husband. But due to contaminants being absorbed into the groundwater, she and her husband were advised by their physician not to have a baby. In her professional capacity, she was fully engaged in trauma counseling with students and despite having nearly perished in the fire herself managed to see beyond the devastation and find a sense of hope for the future.

Rebuilding Paradise is a gripping, well-executed film with top-notch photography, driving musical score and inspirational, narrative story-telling and it covers the trials and tribulations of a community facing an assured annihilation who turn their devastation into a mythic Phoenix as their town rises from its ashes in warm and hopeful tones. Very highly recommended.

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