

Newsweek

Look Who's in Town'



Aug. 25, 2003 — For the past year the documentary “OT: Our Town” has been bowling over audiences at film festivals around the country. Now Scott Hamilton Kennedy’s movie is finally being released to the public. It’s been a banner year for documentaries at the box office—the record-breaking “Bowling for Columbine,” “Spellbound,” “Capturing the Friedmans” and “Winged Migration” have all been unexpected hits. “OT” deserves a place alongside them.

THE FILM CHRONICLES a high-school production of Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town.” What makes this production special is that it’s the first play in 20 years put on by the students of Dominguez High School in infamous Compton, Calif. It’s a school where nothing matters but basketball, where all the

students are African-American or Hispanic, where there is no money for the show, no stage in sight, and rehearsals have to be conducted in the cafeteria. How could the kids in this school, all too familiar with the sound of gunfire, possibly relate to Wilder’s folksy New England period piece?

Kennedy intercuts scenes from the TV production starring Hal Holbrook and Robby Benson with the lives of these Compton teenagers. Unexpected connections begin to occur. Initially, the urban cast members find the goings-on in Grover’s Corners as irrelevant as a picnic on the moon. Then, prodded by teacher-directors Catherine Borek (the filmmaker’s girlfriend) and Karen Greene, they slowly begin to make the play their own, customizing it with music, attitude and inner-city soul. Watching these scared, alienated, wary kids turn into a family as the days unfold is a moving demonstration of the power of art. But can they pull it off, when everyone expects them to fail? The movie takes us up to the fateful night of the performance, smashing the gangsta stereotypes of Compton along the way.

Like most documentaries, “OT” isn’t getting a wide release initially: it opened last Friday in six cities. But if you don’t happen to live in one of those burgs, you can still see it without waiting. It’s being distributed by a new company called Film Movement, a movie club that’s releasing 12 independent and foreign films a year, half of which will play in theaters. All of them will be sent on DVD to members at the same time they are released (filmmovement.com). It’s a new concept in distribution, designed to reach the ordinarily neglected movie lover. “OT: Our Town,” an underdog tale par excellence, seems perfectly matched to its purpose.

—David Ansen