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Winning a Scrappy Race, and a Bit of the Limelight, Too

By [JOSH BENSON](#)

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WOODSTOCK, N.Y., Oct. 1 - So here's the plot.

Two guys - one a legally blind right-wing mayor from a small town in [New Jersey](#), the other a maverick political consultant who helped Jesse Ventura become governor of [Minnesota](#) - show up at a film festival.

The setting is a place where the audiences are so left-leaning that people once booed a film about a Cuban dissident because they found it too critical of Fidel Castro.

Even weirder: The politicians are there as promoters of an award-winning independent movie that has been picked up for distribution next year in theaters across the country.

Oh, and one more thing: They're the stars of the show.

"There are a lot of liberal hippies here, huh?" said Steve Lonegan, the Republican mayor of the Bergen County town of Bogota, shortly before the screening of a documentary about his 2003 campaign. "You think they're going to chase me into a corner and attack me?"

Mr. Lonegan, who recently sought the Republican nomination for governor, emerged intact.

But it was an odd cultural collision of New Jersey politics and art house cinema, indeed, this weekend at the sixth annual Woodstock Film Festival, where a group of producers from New Jersey toasted the announcement of a distribution deal for the documentary, "Anytown, U.S.A."

The movie, the creation of Kristian Fraga and Juan Dominguez, tells the story of the 2003 campaign for mayor that takes unexpected, and heartbreaking, twists and turns.

"We were like, wow," said Mr. Dominguez, a former Bogota town councilman who refinanced his house to pay the initial production costs of his project. "We realized as we were filming that we had something special on our hands."

The story starts just weeks before the election, with the campaign of Mr. Lonagan, whose budget-slashing conservatism and bombastic style as mayor polarized the once tight-knit town of about 8,000. The Democratic challenger was almost tragically inept, brought out of retirement for one last run. Then a third candidate, a local high school sports hero who, like Mr. Lonagan, is partly blind, stepped in as an independent. He recruited Doug Friedline, a consultant who aided Mr. Ventura, to manage his write-in campaign.

The campaign was as hard-fought as any national race, without ever being in danger of being mistaken for one; there was no shortage of propaganda, rumor-mongering and a bitter battle over lawn signs.

And it all took place against the backdrop the Bogota High School football team's run to the state championship, which came after the mayor's austerity measures almost eliminated school sports.

The documentary is the antithesis of "The War Room," the 1993 film that glorified the efforts of James Carville and George Stephanopoulos in selling Bill Clinton to the American people. Almost inadvertently, its point is that elections are about hard work and, surprise, candidates and their policies.

Or, as Thomas P. O'Neill famously put it, providing the film with its opening, "All politics is local."

The documentary was produced by a group of filmmakers, including Mr. Fraga, who grew up in Leonia, near Bogota, and recently moved their company, Sirk Productions, to Manhattan from Fort Lee. "Anytown" was recently bought by Film Movement, a New York distributor, and will run early next year.

It was awarded best documentary at the Long Island and Minneapolis-St. Paul film festivals this year, and Mr. Fraga won best director honors at the Trenton Film Festival.

Part of its appeal, perhaps, is that it is impossible to discern the ideological leanings of the storytellers. (Mr. Fraga is an affirmed liberal, while Mr. Dominguez - a former running mate of Mr. Lonagan - calls himself a "moderate Republican.")

Mr. Friedline said the message transcended partisan politics.

"I think this movie is about an opportunity to see what happens when someone gets passionate about the issues and throws him or herself into a campaign," he said.

At points in the film, Mr. Lonegan is hissable. During a question-and-answer session after the screening, Mark Portier, of New Paltz, told him: "I just wanted to say what a treat this was. It's like going to see 'Star Wars' and Darth Vader himself gets up to take a bow."

The remark rolled off Mr. Lonegan, who sees his star turn as the start of something big.

"Come on," he urged the producers at a party after the screening. "You've got to make a sequel. Just think of the great reality show we could do."

Washingtonpost.com

Lonegan Has Starring Role in Documentary

By ANGELA DELLI SANTI
The Associated Press
Sunday, May 1, 2005; 2:53 PM

TRENTON, N.J. -- A documentary examining the oddities of a small-town mayor's race may not win Steve Lonegan any acting awards, but it will give the underdog candidate for governor some free screen time before the GOP primary.

Considered the most conservative of New Jersey's seven Republican gubernatorial contenders, Lonegan is front and center in "Anytown USA," a 93-minute film lauded at last month's Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival.

The documentary, debuting Sunday in New Jersey at the Trenton Film Festival, looks at the 2003 mayoral race in the tiny Bergen County town of Bogota (pronounced Ba-GO-da). Lonegan, a tough-talking, fiscally conservative incumbent, was running for re-election after angering many by restricting school spending.

Lonegan, who is legally blind, was challenged by Democrat Fred Pesce and Dave Musikant, a former football player who lost his sight because of a brain tumor and is running as an independent write-in candidate.

"It's a microcosm of the national political scene," said director Kristian Fraga, whose film won the emerging filmmakers best documentary award in Minneapolis. "We hope when people see it, they'll pay attention to the importance of voting."

Besides featuring two legally blind candidates, the Bogota mayor's race had other peculiarities. Doug Friedline, who helped Jesse "The Body" Ventura win the Minnesota governor's race, signed on to help Musikant with his write-in campaign.

In the documentary, Lonegan at times comes off as strong-willed and mean-spirited. Still, he pronounced the film "terrific."

"It caught the essence of a local campaign. What it didn't show was that Dave, Fred and I were friendly with each other," Lonegan said.

Lonegan said the film is unlikely to affect his chances in the June 7 Republican primary, where he trails front-runners Doug Forrester and Bret Schundler by as much as 30 percentage points, according to recent polls. Nor will it directly help his campaign coffers.

"Unfortunately, I don't get any royalties," he said.

The Star-Ledger

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Jersey mayoral race wins endorsement

Friday, December 09, 2005

BY LISA ROSE
Star-Ledger Staff

Anytown USA

(Unrated) Film Movement (93 min.)

Directed by Kristian Fraga. Opens Friday at the Cedar Lane Cinemas in Teaneck and Valleyview Cinemas in Wayne.

Stars: 3 1/2

There's so much agenda-driven filmmaking on the documentary scene, it's notable when a political movie comes along that covers its subject with journalistic balance.

"Anytown USA" is an exercise in old school objective reporting, chronicling the 2003 mayoral race in Bogota, N.J. It's a slice of life, not a manifesto, capturing passionate viewpoints on both sides of the Republican-Democrat divide.

Although the election took place two years ago, the sentiments of voters still resonate. Many of them express their frustrations with the Republican incumbent, but they don't know enough about the other candidates to choose with confidence. The Democratic contender hasn't clearly articulated his plans for change, while the write-in independent hopeful lacks political experience.

Director Kristian Fraga, a Leonia native making his feature filmmaking debut, allows the story to unfold with minimal artifice. He doesn't really need to embellish the tale, since it has more twists than an episode of "Lost."

The movie introduces us to the incumbent mayor, Steve Lonagan, a seasoned, smooth-talking conservative who's overcome a disability -- he's legally blind -- to make a political career. Coincidentally, his key challenger, an independent named Dave Musikant, also is visually impaired.

A motivational speaker and former high school football hero, Musikant enters the race late as write-in opponent. His candidacy is overseen by a consultant who helped remake wrestler Jesse Ventura into a politician. Musikant gets the word out creatively, with pencil-shaped lawn signs and a costume mascot. The Democratic candidate, Fred Pesce, is a former councilman whose campaign is low-key due to a shortage of funds.

"Anytown USA," shot on digital video, ventures backstage at headquarters for all three mayoral rivals. Early on, we see a heated town meeting during which Lonagan is lambasted for his plan to cut school spending by suspending the varsity football program.

It seems like there's such pervasive negativity toward him, his opponent will win an easy victory. The film demonstrates, however, that politics are never really that simple and voter behavior is volatile.

In the weeks leading up to the election, tempers flare and desperation mounts. There are vandalized campaign signs and propaganda newspapers. One candidate is seen making a frantic phone call to arrange delivery of a single absentee ballot from Estonia. In order to maximize turnout, volunteers shuttle elderly residents from their homes to polling locations. The fervor continues right through the final hour of voting, and the ending is a kicker.

The suspense of the story compensates for the film's no-budget production values. The movie is more than a snapshot of local politics. It's a nail-biting drama.

Rating note: The film contains strong language.



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Theater to screen documentary on Bogota

Thursday, October 6, 2005

By BRIAN ABERBACK
STAFF WRITER

BOGOTA - The borough is set to hit the big screen Oct. 21, when "Anytown USA" makes its local theatrical debut at Cedar Lane Cinema in Teaneck.

The award-winning documentary follows the 2003 mayoral and Borough Council election, giving a colorful, behind-the-scenes look at small-town politics and the campaign trail.

The screening, scheduled for 7:30 p.m., is part of Jersey Filmmakers of Tomorrow, a festival sponsored by the Fort Lee Film Commission, whose goal is to nurture and inspire young filmmakers. The festival continues with a screening of student films at the Bergen County Academies in Hackensack at noon Oct. 22.

Juan Dominguez, the producer of "Anytown USA," is a lifelong Bogota resident and former borough councilman. Director Kristian Fraga is a Leonia native.

Released this year, "Anytown USA" won best documentary and director prizes at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Film Festival, the Trenton Film Festival and the Long Island Film Festival.

Film Movement, a New York-based company, acquired the distribution rights for "Anytown USA" last month. The film is expected to open in several New Jersey theaters next month, and in major cities across the country in 2006.

Tickets for the Teaneck screening are \$10; the student film festival is free. To reserve seats for "Anytown USA," send a check payable to the Fort Lee Film Commission to: Fort Lee Film Commission, 309 Main St., Fort Lee, NJ 07024, Attn: Tom Meyers.

If available, tickets may also be purchased at the theater box office the day of the screening.

For more information, call (201) 592-3663 or visit jerseyfilmmakersoftomorrow.org or fortleefilm.org.

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