

From Seatbelts to Spoilers

Nader's rollercoaster of a legacy

AN UNREASONABLE MAN: Written and directed by Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan. Produced by Kevin O'Donnell and Alexis Provost. Music, Joe Kraemer. With Ralph Nader, Pat Buchanan, Joan Claybrook, Phil Donahue, Justin Martin, William Greider and Howard Zinn. IFC First Take, 2007. 122 minutes. Not rated. ★★☆☆☆

Though it's been years since the 2000 election, bringing up Ralph Nader is still a dicey proposition with some people. Nader's Green Party bid for the presidency, depending on your point of view, painted the longtime consumer rights advocate as an idealist trying to change the system — or as a horrible spoiler who cost Al Gore the Oval Office.

Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan's new documentary, *An Unreasonable Man*, takes its title from a George Bernard Shaw quote from *Man and Superman*. To borrow a line from another film, the title may not mean what you think it means. *Man* is not an entirely unbiased doc; Mantel used to work for Nader, and the two-hour film is slightly tilted toward Nader's early years as a tireless crusader for automobile safety and countless other consumer rights that many people now take for granted. But any portrait of Ralph Nader would be incomplete without a serious look at these early achievements as his army

of students and young activists wrote reports, took on government agencies and worked tenaciously toward admirable goals.

An Unreasonable Man is an eye-opening piece of work in many ways, at least for someone who wasn't alive in the early years of Nader's crusades. It'll be news to plenty of younger folks that Nader was once on the cover of not only *Newsweek* but also *People* or that General Motors had young women chatting Nader up in grocery stores, trying to dig up dirt that would besmirch his character and get him off their backs about auto safety. The simple list of pieces of legislation which Nader helped get passed is almost incredible; everything from 1965's National Automobile and Highway Traffic Safety Act to 1970's law establishing the Environmental Protection Agency to the Freedom of Information Act has Nader's fingerprints on it somewhere.

The film takes its time moving through



the 1960s and '70s, but once it hits the '80s, things speed up. We're very quickly brought up to 1996 and then 2000. And, gradually, the conversation shifts. Former "Nader's Raiders" begin to sound doubtful about their old colleague's political inclinations. Nader's supporters and detractors each get their chance to speak, some arguing that he was what cost Gore that election, others pointing out related facts, such as that every single third-party candidate in swing-state

Florida had more votes than the number of votes separating Bush from Gore.

One truly fascinating part of this story comes in the form of revelations about the presidential debates. Perhaps I'm naïve, but I didn't know the debates were run by a commission that in turn is sponsored by major corporate donors. And I certainly didn't suspect how thoroughly the Commission on Presidential Debates would shut out a third-party candidate. An analyst explains that at the time of the debates, Nader wasn't considered a "factor" in the 2000 elections, reason enough for him not to be allowed to debate with Bush and Gore. But the debate commission went beyond that, denying Nader entry even as a ticketholding spectator. Daniel Mitchell of the conservative Heritage Foundation innocently claims, earlier in the film, that corporations are practically powerless political entities; an astonishing scene when Massachusetts state police, under what appears to be the debate commission's authority, ban Nader from the debate grounds suggests otherwise.

An Unreasonable Man might be a slightly difficult film to watch in the theater as it raises the kind of issues you want to discuss *immediately*. It's a fascinating film, though, a very personal look at a man whose personal life is a mystery and whose public achievements — in a very broad sense of the word public — are now overshadowed by his equally public tarring as a spoiler, however accurate or inaccurate that perception may be. **EW**

An Unreasonable Man opens Friday, April 20 at the Bijou.

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