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Review: 'Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed' bites down hard

Ben Stein enjoys some popcorn at the film's gala opening in Dallas.

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By John P. Meyer

How does one go about commenting objectively on a film like *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*?

It's a pretty dang polarizing piece, thematically. If you come down on one side of the fence (or, to use the metaphor employed in the film, the wall) it's easy to find yourself making fun of its bald-faced myopia; while if you hang out across the conceptual boundary, you'll find yourselves giving the slickly-produced 90-minute polemic a "standing o" while star Ben Stein receives likewise accolades from an audience full of eager young students who've been listening to him describe why the scientific establishment is out to put the nails in God's coffin.

Like other documentaries which embrace one side of an argument without any pretense at objectivity, *Expelled* bites down hard on its thesis - which states that proponents of Darwinian evolution are mindless, elitist drones unwilling to own up to the folly of their flawed beliefs - and refuses to let it go. There's nothing unusual about a filmmaker choosing to present only the evidence that supports his chosen approach to a topic - it's what we'd all do if we were making a movie about something we felt strongly enough about to... well... make a movie.

At its world premiere (at Dallas' Angelika Film Center on Wednesday, April 16), producer Logan Craft introduced the film by telling the (invitation only) audience that "the film became something of a lightning rod," referring to the fact that it commenced being attacked by detractors before the film even opened. Star and co-scripter Ben Stein, standing in front of the theater audience in his signature tennis shoes, admitted: "I thought it was something that was only gonna be shown in church basements." Thanks to distributor Rocky Mountain Pictures, however, the film opened nationwide on Friday, April 18, on over a thousand screens.

The film raises freedom of speech issues in addition to scientific and spiritual ones, and goes so far as to argue that Darwinism contributed in no small part to the Holocaust. (Ouch. Makes it tough to advocate for evolutionary science when you've established that Hitler was just attempting to benefit mankind by driving evolution forward.) Furthermore, evolutionary theory is painted as the ultimate God-killer: a slayer of spirituality leading directly to the devaluing of human life. (Enter the myopia

which allows the filmmakers to overlook the fact that religion-based movements and conflicts have led to wholesale slaughter on a global scale since the dawn of humanity.)

These are the hot button topics which don't emerge until later in the film. What leads up to this heavier stuff is the premise that the scientific establishment is "run" by Darwinian evolutionists who have some sort of sinister stake in beating back the tide of alternative explanations for biological history, such as intelligent design. The film makes considerable hay over the Smithsonian's firing of Richard Sternberg, who allowed an article (by Stephen C. Meyer) to be published in Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington, of which he was the editor at the time. Other embattled ID proponents are profiled, including a tenured professor at Baylor University who had a research project pulled out from under him by the academic leadership. It would have been interesting to hear what his research dealt with, but that detail was deemed less relevant than the fact that he had been censured for pursuing it.

The filmmakers deserve credit for their clever use of classic film clips and vintage newsreels as counterpoints to the numerous interviews and expositions - which might have proven tedious if strung together in uninterrupted sequence. And I've got to admit, Ben Stein has an knack for putting academics off their guard and on the defensive: his tete-a-tete with the flat-footed Richard Dawkins is worth the price of admission on its own. But can that really make up for the fact that the entire premise of the piece is built upon a basic misunderstanding (whether intentional or inadvertent) of the empirical nature of science?

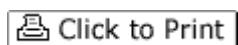
I'm afraid this movie isn't going to hoist any craven evolutionists over the wall and onto the side of the enlightened, but it's sure to play like the sweetest of siren songs to those already tramping that ground.

MOST POTENT IMAGE: Ben Stein attempting to stare down the life-size marble statue of Charles Darwin at Down House. (Ben, baby, the stone guy's always gonna win that contest.)

NOT THIS MEDIA, PAL: "The tendency of the media is to side with the establishment."

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