HOWARD ZINN: YOU CAN'T BE NEUTRAL ON A MOVING TRAIN

Reviewed by Amy Ione, The Diatribe Institute, P.O. Box 5813, Santa Rosa, CA 95406-0813, U.S.A. E-mail: <ione@diatribe.com>

After watching the 2004 Democratic convention on C-SPAN, I slipped You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train, a video biography of Howard Zinn, into my player, wondering how it would look after a 4-day infomercial presented by the American Democratic Party. Like most people who are worried about U.S. politics today, I know Zinn's reputation as an activist/scholar. I also remembered that as a young college student, years before the release of his popular People's History of the United States, I read his work when drawn to take courses on topics strange to my life today, ranging from constitutional history to labor law. Having long ago put these subjects aside, I still retain some sense that we can never separate our lives from politics. This idea has become particularly pronounced in recent years, which unfortunately too often brings to mind the old saying "If you're not upset by the current state of affairs, you're not paying attention."

You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train can only be described as a wonderful movie for our time and a superb biography. On a basic level Deb Ellis and Denis Mueller document the life and times of this historian, activist and author. What sets the production apart is the way they weave together contemporary and rare archival materials, interspersing interviews with Howard Zinn and the many people who have worked with him over the years. Testimonials from his colleagues and friends (including Noam Chomsky, Marian Wright Edelman, Daniel Ellsberg, Tom Hayden and Alice Walker) greatly enhance the video. Even more enlightening is seeing most of the people in both their contemporary and historical personae. The juxtaposition of the events that forged each of these individuals with Zinn's influence and his deeply felt commitment to activism left me with a sense that many of us understand what is to be gained by speaking out against draconian measures and injustice.

In Zinn's case, the way his personal history makes his many achievements so striking is remarkable. In his early childhood Zinn lived in the slums of New York City, often in cold-water flats. After high school, before World War II, he worked in the shipyards and organized workers. Enlisting in the Air Force in World War II, he became a bomber. One understands Howard Zinn's metamorphosis when he recalls how the bombs he dropped were a factor in the development of his later instincts for peace. Even more striking are the segments on his time at Spelman College during the early Civil Rights Movement. One of two white professors at this black college in Atlanta, Georgia, Zinn encouraged activism among his students. He eventually was fired for doing so. His time at Boston University is better known. There, he led students in protesting the Vietnam War, as he continues to lead protests today. Although it is not possible to detail all of the areas Zinn has touched in his full life, another indication of his reach is his peace mission to Vietnam during that war, when he negotiated the return of American servicemen from the North Vietnamese.

Anyone with an interest in politics will find this video stimulating. Watching the tape right after the convention in Boston made it difficult to separate Zinn's style of patriotism from American...
and encourages the viewer to respond in kind. That the film is the winner of the Audience Award for Best Documentary at the Provincetown International Film Festival speaks to its appeal, which I would second. Indeed, it is a film worth seeing. A short trailer is available at <http://www.firstrunfeatures.com/howardzinn.html>. Also at this site is a list of upcoming play dates in the United States and Canada.