

Review/Interview: **"American Farm"** by Danny Lanzetta

An ideal 'Farm'

Danny Lanzetta got an advance screening of the new documentary "American Farm" and interviewed director Jim Spione, a native of Fishkill.

Whether or not you like Michael Moore, there can be no denying that the mischief-maker behind 2004's "Fahrenheit 9/11" has heightened awareness of the American documentary. And although Moore often skewers subjects who are undoubtedly deserving of scrutiny (Charlton Heston and George W. Bush to name a prominent two), his aggressive approach can be off-putting, to say the least. Moore is never reticent to cast himself as a character in his films, that of the slovenly and unflappable crusader, who resolutely fights evil without regard for the right-wing backlash that inevitably follows. Often, though, Moore comes across as sanctimoniously as those he critiques, which, of course, obscures the poignancy of his message.

No such problem for Jim Spione with his new film, the quietly urgent "American Farm," Spione's examination of his family's efforts to sustain a small dairy farm in Richfield Springs, NY. The film centers on Langdon Ames, the fifth Ames son to own the property over the last 150 years. "Lanny" has run the farm for nearly 40 years, but suddenly finds that there is nobody willing to carry on the tradition. The film, which premiered in Cooperstown in February, gets its local unveiling this Sunday at Upstate Films in Rhinebeck at 1 p.m. Spione will be in attendance and lead a discussion group after the screening.

Spione, who currently resides in New York City, grew up in Fishkill. "My mother grew up on the farm," he says. "Every year, I go to the family reunion there and one year, my cousin showed me a five-page memoir she

had written about the farm over the years. When I read that, I got to thinking about telling the story. The movie is really the story of rural America in the 20th century. But it's also an impressionistic look at the history of a family."

Despite his own memories of visiting the farm as a child, Spione made a conscious decision to keep himself out of the movie, a choice that lends the film a sense of delicacy and nuance. Although there is certainly a real perspective – Spione does, indeed, lament the disappearance of the family farm, and his narrative voice is apparent through his directorial choices – the film is careful to let its "characters" do the talking, as opposed to bombarding its audience with overt editorializing. The result is not a film that languishes in nostalgic clichés, but rather thrills its audience with its examination of real people involved in rich, complex relationships. The farm acts as a symbol for the more methodical times from which those relationships were born.

"The types of relationships that I examine in the film are probably in jeopardy," says Spione, resignedly, "because the pace of life is greater, now, and the demands on all of us are greater, as well. Now, technology allows us to contact anyone at any time. But when will you actually get to see people? There was that closeness and sense of cohesion that came from living and working on the farm with each other. Most of that has dissolved now."

"American Farm" is Spione's feature-length, directorial debut, but he already shows the acuity of a veteran. The film does occasionally become too sentimental. The original music by Emile Menasche is effective, if a bit melodramatically utilized at times. But Spione has a terrific eye for imagery. He views the film as if it were a novel, in which he weaves together disparate voices into an elaborate mosaic that ultimately reveals a singular story. Perhaps the most haunting image of the movie is of Lanny and his

"American Farm"
Morninglight Films
Directed by Jim Spione
84 min.
Not rated
Screening: Sunday, April 17, 1 p.m.,
Upstate Films, Rhinebeck, followed
by a discussion with the director
845.876.2515
www.upstatefilms.org

"It's really just a character drama. There are the farm issues, of course, but the film is not about those issues as much as it should be a catalyst for discussing them. But the movie is really about the relationships that come from these types of places."

– Jim Spione, director



Langdon Ames, a fifth-generation dairy farmer whose three sons rejected the family tradition, in James Spione's (above) documentary "American Farm."

wife sitting at the breakfast table, pouring cereal in silence. It is an image that is more essential to the film than any grandiose proclamation would be. Spione humanizes the disappearance of the farms by showing these people for what most of us are, anyway: ordinary souls fighting for a little piece of beauty.

"It's not a political statement," says Spione, as he attempts to distance himself from the recent onslaught of "polemical" documentaries. "It's really just a character drama. There are the farm issues, of course, but the film is not about those issues as much as it should be a catalyst for discussing them. But the movie is really about the relationships that come from these types of places."

In the end, "American Farm" is a good film because it offers no conclusions, and its filmmaker refuses to compromise its subtlety in the name of self-righteous indignation. It is a distinctly American story about everyday people and their struggle to preserve the things they cherish. As one of Lanny's sons says toward the end of the film, the Ames family farm has run its course. But the stories it has been home to can never be so callously discarded. Spione is making sure of that.

"The Ames family is just a microcosm of all the changes going on across the country. I'm trying to convey the emotion associated with this event, the end of this tradition. These human dramas keep repeating themselves. The farming issue is just the canvas they play out on."

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