

TALES FROM PLANET EARTH

Films For Environmental Action

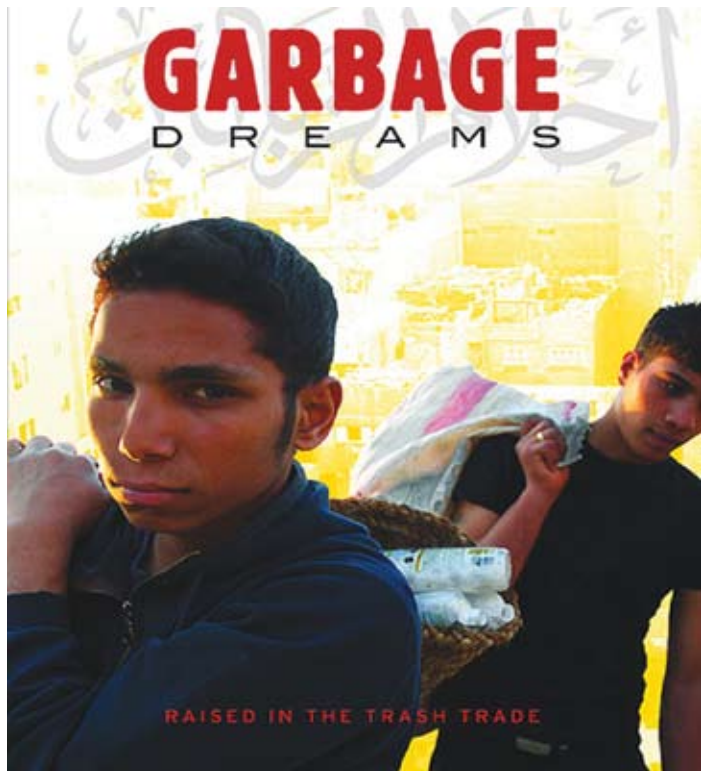
Tales from Planet Earth, which will take place at the UW-Madison campus from November 6 until November 8, is a film festival with an added dimension: public outreach events.

by **GEORGE ZENS**

The three-day festival is organized by the UW-Madison's Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies and its overall theme is Justice, with four main topic areas: Landscapes of Labor (includes movies like Sleep Dealer, Harvest of Shame and Man of Aran/How the Myth Was Made), Precious Resources (including What's on Your Plate?, Garbage Dreams and Our Daily Bread), Strange Weather (including Trouble the Water, The Grapes of Wrath and Cooked) and In the Company of Animals (including Never Cry Wolf, Born Free and Saving Luna).

More than forty environmental films will be shown in various locations, accompanied by related events, such as post-film discussions, meetings with the filmmakers and question-and-answer sessions.

As Molly Schwebach, out-



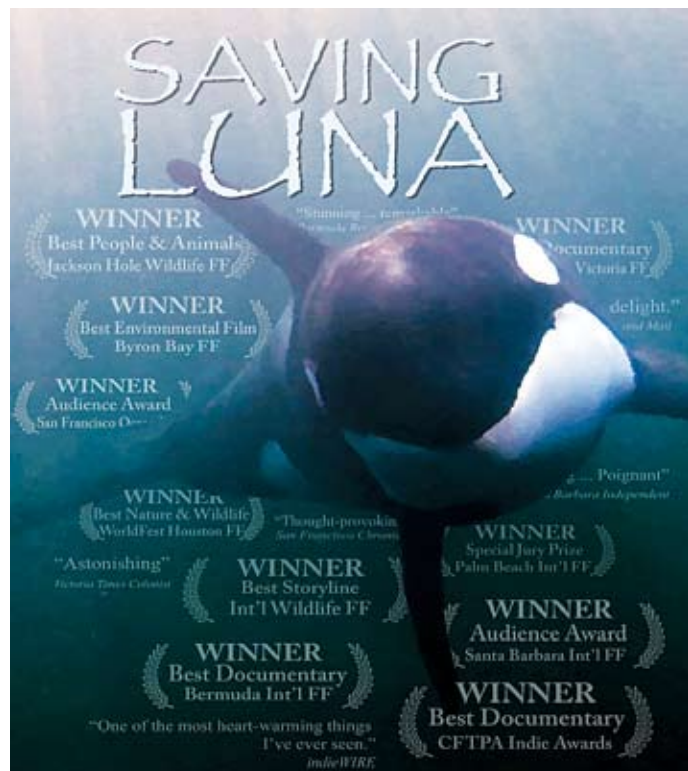
reach coordinator for the Nelson Institute, explains, the festival is the culmination of more than a year's preparation work and builds on the success of the inaugural 2007 festival, whose main theme was Hope:

"We have been working with other organizations, screened some movies and built support. The movie What's on Your Plate? about what we feed our children for example was pre-screened at Sherman

Middle School in Madison and the filmmakers finished it based on the reactions they got from the students. The final version will be shown here."

While the movies in themselves are already worth seeing, the festival's organizers have higher ambitions:

"We pair them with other activities," explains Molly Schwebach. "That's an important aspect, that we don't just show the movies, but tie them



in with local events and organizations. Some of them will also be shown in Baraboo, Chequamegon Bay, Dodgeville and Milwaukee next year as part of the Wisconsin Humanities Council's Making It Home initiative."

These are movies on a mission, movies with a purpose beyond entertainment.

"You can have the best science data in the world," says Gregg Mitman, "if you don't

put it into stories you are not going to move people into action. Issues don't compel people to act, stories do."

Gregg Mitman, the Nelson Institute's interim director, teaches classes on environmental film production and on community engagement through film at the University of Wisconsin. Two years ago, grant money made it possible for the Nelson Institute to have two environmental filmmakers

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Photo by GEORGE ZENS

Gregg Mitman believes that films play important role in social and environmental change.

in residence, thus also providing the students with unique opportunities.

"We teach students, who have no previous experience in making movies, how to tell effective stories through films," he explains. "Their task is to find stories that resonate and to create community engagement through their work. They work with community partners and create events around the films that will have an impact around

specific themes."

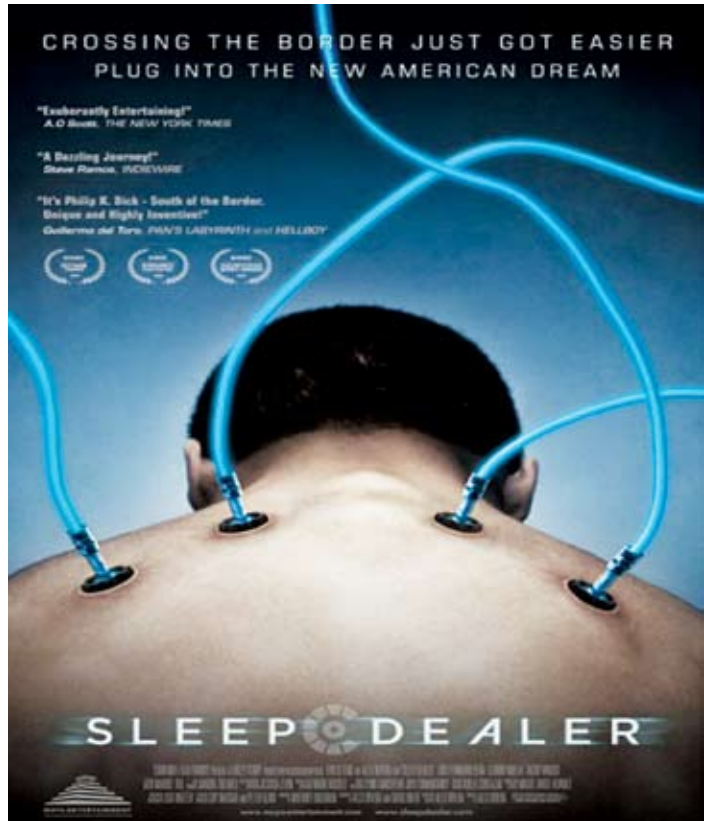
The movie *Hunger Season* for instance, shown in partnership with First United Methodist Church, traces the journey of food aid from the fields of Wisconsin farmers to USAID and finally to Swaziland, and part of the event accompanying the screening will be a dinner featuring the same corn meal that children in Swaziland live on.

"We hope to make this type of approach into a model

for other filmmakers to create community events," says Gregg Mitman, "just like we would like to turn the festival with its community engagement component into a national model."

But aren't films too superficial to convey serious content?

"People react to stories; personal stories move us, pull us in," Gregg Mitman replies. "Why do you think *An Inconvenient Truth* was so popular? It was not because



of the issue, but because of the personality of Al Gore. The point is: How can stories serve issues that we try educate people in? We live in a visual culture. We need new outlets and ways to communicate. Now, I hope that people will deepen the knowledge they gain through movies, and we need to develop strategies to ensure that through community engagement movies can have an impact long after they have been screened."

New technologies, and especially the internet, provide the audiovisual media with unprecedented possibilities

and access to potential viewers:

"Movies are cheaper to make and they can bypass the whole Hollywood machinery," says Gregg Mitman. "The film *The Story of Stuff* for example was never shown in theaters, but it had some powerful distribution through the web. Films have a big potential for change, not least by inspiring audiences to do something."

For more information:

* *Tales from Planet Earth:* www.talesfromplanetearth.com

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