

## Michael Moore Gets ‘Dangerous’ at Montclair Film Festival

By Brian Glaser

Baristanet.com, 5/6/13

[baristanet.com/2013/05/michael-moore-gets-dangerous-at-the-montclair-film-fest/](http://baristanet.com/2013/05/michael-moore-gets-dangerous-at-the-montclair-film-fest/)

As an opening gambit for a film fest discussion about documentaries, “I hate documentaries” is on the provocative side. But it’s standard fare coming from director Michael Moore, who presided over Sunday evening’s “Dangerous Docs” event at the 2013 Montclair Film Festival.

Joining Moore on stage at the Montclair Art Museum were three documentarians whose work screened at the MFF: Lucy Walker (*The Crash Reel*), Bill Siegel (*The Trials of Muhammad Ali*) and Montclair-based Dawn Porter (*Gideon’s Army*). The event was modeled on the “Dangerous Docs” series that Moore hosts each year at his Traverse City Film Festival, and his guests shared the host’s predilection for calling on the audience to take a sometimes-difficult look at painful and/or dysfunctional aspects of society.

So the director of hot-button docs like *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* framed the sold-out talk with the idea that most filmgoers don’t really want to see documentaries about tough subjects, asking: “Why are we bothering to do this?”

“I have been feeling a little discouraged,” Walker admitted, noting that she has yet to make any money for even her most successful projects. But she and her fellow panelists all recounted experiences of seeing their films at festivals or other screenings and watching audience members become visibly moved and engaged.

And it was that idea of engagement that dominated the discussion. The filmmakers all agreed that films like theirs took on worthy subjects, but it was hard to turn a successful screening into real social action to, for example, improve the public-defender system shown in Porter’s film.

Moore wondered, “Maybe it’s enough that we just make the movies, and it’s up to [the audience] to do something.” Siegel disagreed, saying that filmmakers who travel with their films to festivals like the one in Montclair have an opportunity to foster engagement that can go beyond the film.

Porter says that meeting her audiences directly is how she knows the work of the documentarian is worthwhile: “There is clearly an audience that wants to talk about these issues,” she said, and suggested that the filmmaker has to put in the effort to curate their audience by reaching out to like-minded groups and activists in each place the film is screened.

Moore was quick to note that he continues to be optimistic about the power of documentaries (“I keep doing this and think it matters”), and announced that this week, he and a group of other documentary directors will be breaking ground on a new Manhattan movie theater on Lower Broadway that will be dedicated exclusively to screening non-fiction films.

At the end of the talk, Moore addressed the panel directly with his core advice for documentary filmmakers who want to build a larger and more engaged audience of American filmgoers, which is to focus on the latter part of their job description more than the former: “Don’t make a documentary,” he told them. “Make a *movie*.”