

Film takes unique look at Montana landscape

by Justin Franz | February 10, 2010 | *Montana Kaimin*

Rainer Komers isn't from Montana, but that didn't stop the German-born filmmaker from telling one of the most complex and interesting stories to come out of western Montana — one of industry, people and the land.

To tell this story, Komers traveled just east of Missoula to Milltown, home to one of the most extensive environmental cleanups in American history.

But Milltown is just one of the places featured in the 34-minute documentary titled "Milltown, Montana." The former sawmill town serves as a jumping-off point for a study of how industry has changed Montana, so the filmmaker also visited Butte, Libby and Anaconda.

Komers' film was selected from over 1,000 entries to be part of this week's Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, according to events director Mike Steinberg.

"Our job was to build the best program we can based on content," Steinberg said, adding that the film is one of almost two dozen that feature nature and the environment as their subjects.

Steinberg also said these nature films are just a few of the more than 100 films to be shown over the course of the 10-day festival.

Steinberg said "Milltown, Montana" was an obvious choice for the lineup because Komers has entered a film in the festival for the last few years. It was a few years ago, during one of those trips as a guest of the festival, that he fell in love with the landscape of Montana.

"He was so mesmerized by the landscape and presence of industry," Steinberg said. "It means a lot that he has come back."

Choosing western Montana as the setting for his newest film was easy, having made similar films about the effect of industry on land and people in Europe.

What is unusual about the film is that it features no narration and almost no dialogue, a trademark of Komers' films.

The director has used that style since 1997 when he was making a feature-length documentary. After finishing production, he realized how much film was wasted on the cutting-room floor, mainly the 50 tapes with useless interview footage.

"After that, I got the feeling that I had to change something in my life and my work, to reduce the consumption of materials," Komers said in an e-mail.

Since then, he has produced a series of similar films that use a cinematic, rather than a narrative, method. That way, the images and sound tell their own story, said Komers, and in some ways, the combination creates its own “poetry.”

When producing his movies, Komers uses simple editing techniques and shows only what is there, not showing favoritism among subjects.

“There are no hierarchies between objects, people and places,” Komers said. “They are all treated equally and examined for their rhythm and gestures.”

While some may view the documentary as unconventional, with the scenes only scratching the surface of an incredibly complex story, both Steinberg and Komers hope that audiences will go in with an open mind about what they are viewing.

“We’re often spoon-fed information,” Steinberg said. “This is a film that simply allows us to observe. It’s not a film that will take you by the hand and tell you what to think.”

But Steinberg said he believes in the sensibilities of the local audience and thinks they will be able to see familiar scenes in a different light.

“I have high hopes that the audience will appreciate it,” Steinberg said.

“Milltown, Montana” will play on Saturday, Feb. 14 at 4 p.m. at the Wilma Theater as part of the 2010 Big Sky Documentary Film Festival.

For more information on the festival, visit <http://www.bigskyfilmfest.org/>.

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