

Star-Telegram

Gas man gives 'thumbs down' to Damon's Promised Land

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While my low expectations for the film *Promised Land* were validated, I must admit to a troubling post-viewing reaction that borders on the insidious.

At first blush, Gus Van Sant's direction and Matt Damon's screenwriting appear to be juvenile stabs at dramatizing hydraulic fracturing (fracking), to include a plot twist reminiscent of high school creative writing.

Unlike its muckraking predecessor *Gasland*, this movie makes no attempt at scientific legitimacy. It relies on tired anti-industry cliches, claiming that fracking will "scorch the earth" or "contaminate water tables."

Damon's character mocks real science with a mention of DISH, Texas, the poster child for environmental parody. Recall that the town council agreed to change the name from Clark to DISH in exchange for 10 years of free satellite television and a DVR player for each resident. Claims of rampant pollution due to drilling were dispelled by residents' blood tests.

Nevertheless, Damon's name-dropping "DISH" is proof positive that he conspires with his Hollywood cohorts and environmental cronies in a no-holds-barred bashing of the natural gas industry.

In lieu of science, *Promised Land* focuses on themes intrinsic to the American ethos: values of honesty and fair play, multigenerational family ties to land and the attendant sacredness of property rights. It is a tale about working-class identity and the seduction of newfound money.

Damon and Van Sant use fracking as a dramatic device to explore the tightrope between community and personal integrity, and the villainy of purported concern by corporations for the greater good.

Damon's character embraces a folksy, I'm-one-of-you worldview, yet he betrays this persona in proclaiming that "I'm not selling them natural gas, I'm selling them a way out." It is here that the insidious nature of *Promised Land* begins to unveil. A way out of what?

Damon and Van Sant depict a farm community in which, as one character states, "I can die with my dignity," an Americana of family values worth dying for, a lifestyle wherein one empathizes with one's neighbor and even knows him by name.

The truth is that rural America has been imperiled for decades. A hegemony of economic and sociological forces has rendered family farming a relic of the past.

Damon's character admits that although he comes from a farming community, the local manufacturing plant provides economic sustenance.

What Damon and Van Sant are telling us is that given the opportunity to preserve lifestyles embraced by rural America, local inhabitants should take the money and run.

This condescending attitude besmirches rural life under the guise of protecting the land, elevating bogus land contamination arguments reinforced by junk science to the apex of environmental values. This is patently evident in a scene in which a young couple signs a lucrative mineral lease, followed by the good-ol'-boy husband screeching up to the local bar in his pricey new sports car while yelling that drinks are on him.

After all, limousine-environmentalists have a duty to protect rural Americans from themselves, individuals too unsophisticated to handle windfall money.

The true danger of *Promised Land* is that it tugs at the heart, albeit in a saccharine, creepy way. Its sentimentality glosses over important facts, including studies that show fracking is highly monitored, safe and a cleaner energy source.

The good news is that the natural gas industry, burned by the public relations fiasco of *Gasland*, is being proactive in addressing the

misinformation embedded in *Promised Land*. The battle for the hearts and minds of the American people is on, and the energy needs and economic viability of our country are at stake. May the truth prevail.

Mel LeBlanc is managing partner of Shale Play Advisors, LLC., which promotes responsible urban drilling.

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