

GOOD FIGHTS

"Detropia" and "The Eye of the Storm."

BY DAVID DENBY

Detropia," a lyrical film about the destruction of a great American city, is the most moving documentary I've seen in years. The city is Detroit, and the film, made by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing (who is a native), is both an ardent love letter to past vitality and a grateful salute to those who

tim to warfare or weather. It was abandoned. Michigan Central Depot was a grand railway station just twenty-five years ago. Today, its massive interior arches are crumbling. In the film, Noah Stewart, an African-American tenor, who is a star of the still surviving Detroit Opera, sings Puccini in the decay-



Installation artists in Detroit, in a documentary by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing.

remain in place—the survivors, utterly without illusions, who refuse to leave. "Detropia" has its share of forlorn images: office buildings with empty eye sockets for windows; idle, rotting factories, with fantastic networks of chutes, pipes, and stacks; a lone lit tavern on a dark block. Yet the filmmakers are so attuned to color and to shape that I was amazed by the handsomeness of what I was seeing. I'm not being perverse: this is a beautiful film. Ruins, of course, often strike us as magnificent. Ancient ones enchant us as reminders of lost glories, but there's a sense of safe distance and conscious nostalgia in our awe. In "Detropia," we're looking at American ruins—an impromptu graveyard of industrial ambition—and we feel awe, but here it's mixed with disbelief and shock. This city didn't fall vic-

ing building. It's a mordant and generous gesture: the station was once a kind of stage, too. By the end of the movie, the filmmakers' aestheticism turns into an explicit promise of renewal.

The population of Detroit, at its peak, in the early nineteen-fifties, was 1.8 million. But, as new highways were built, and as the automobile manufacturers began closing plants, people with money moved to the suburbs, and many workers, especially African-Americans, were left stranded. By 2010, the population had dropped to seven hundred thousand, and the city, its tax base eviscerated, was fighting bankruptcy. At the beginning of "Detropia," a wrecking crew working for the city razes a small house, while a local-news anchor, standing in front of the demo job, tries to keep up a cheerful line of patter. The

city is systematically being taken apart, and good cheer is at a premium. At night, three guys warm themselves around a fire on a lot; they've been hauling scrap metal out of vacant buildings all day. They get eleven cents a pound for steel, two dollars and fifty cents for copper. They are bitter but funny, and far from licked. In part, the movie is a testament to spontaneous economic activity in the ruins.

But depopulation also creates a longing for radical solutions. The filmmakers record the moment when, at an impassioned town meeting a few years back, citizens living in a sparsely populated area revolt after their services—bus lines, even street lights—are cut, leaving them unable to get to work. At a planning session, the mayor, Dave Bing, hears an unusual idea. Large areas of the city's hundred and thirty-nine square miles are deserted. Why not concentrate people in the most densely populated neighborhoods, provide them with services, and turn the remaining lots into vegetable gardens? At another noisy town meeting, residents angrily say that they won't be moved; some skeptics sitting on a front porch trade jokes about gunfights breaking out over a tomato patch. Yet recent news reports from Detroit indicate that the idea is far from dead. So deindustrialization may have arrived at an end point where disused turf is reclaimed for an earlier form of economy.

The film's most harrowing scene is emblematic of what has been happening to the middle class. At a meeting held by Local 22 of the U.A.W., members respond to demands by the American Axle company that they take big pay cuts—say, from seventeen dollars an hour to fourteen-fifty. Accept the cuts, the company says, or we'll shut down the plant. The workers are stunned. It's not just the lost money, they say; it's the humiliation, the sense that their work is worthless. (Soon afterward, a title on the screen informs us, the plant was shut down.)

The union meeting is led by George McGregor, a warmly sympathetic U.A.W. veteran, who says, "The middle class—it was started right here." Living on union wages, he says, a fam-

ily could afford to send the kids to college, maybe even buy a little place up north, on the lakes. McGregor, driving around the city, is one of three African-American characters who serve as guides and historians. Crystal Starr, a young, realistic but upbeat video blogger, purposefully enters trashed and empty office buildings to film them, as if she had worked there years ago. She's like a ghost longing for life. Tommy Stephens, a former teacher, now owns a bar near the Hamtramck G.M. plant; his business rises and falls according to whether the plant is functioning. Stephens is a great talker, and he sounds an ominous note: if the American middle class continues to disappear, and a tiny minority of rich people are surrounded by a vast number of poor, he says, revolution could follow.

In 2006, Ewing and Grady made "Jesus Camp," a documentary portrait of evangelical youths that was more cautionary than celebratory. This time, they are looking for the spiritual element in economic life. They shoot Detroit's towers at dusk, and the image could be an old Disney fantasy of a magic kingdom. It's almost an invocation: it turns out that young people, drawn by the cheap real estate, are moving in. An installation artist says that he bought a loft for twenty-five thousand dollars. Detroit is redefining "the value of things," he says, astonished by his good fortune in recession America. Around the time that the movie was shot (mostly in 2010), new Web-based

companies also began taking advantage of the low rents in downtown. "Detroit" ends on a hopeful note. Perhaps these latest risk-takers, with their new-era-capitalist ebullience, can yet bring the city back to life.

"The Eye of the Storm," based on the 1973 novel by Patrick White, is a comedy of monsters. In an upper-class suburb of Sydney, in 1972, an intelligent and tyrannical old woman named Elizabeth Hunter (Charlotte Rampling) is seriously ill but still conscious of her power. She wills herself not to die, in part to spite her two estranged children, Sir Basil (Geoffrey Rush), a great actor, and the nervous, unhappy divorcee Dorothy (Judy Davis), both of whom have arrived from Europe to claim what they expect will be a large inheritance. Elizabeth, in her mansion, lies in bed or on a couch, dolled up in a lilac wig and jewelry, and receives her children. Immediately, the knives come out. Elizabeth attacks, and Basil and Dorothy fight back with whatever bluster or deceit they can pull off. None of them ever tell the truth. Basil, in an interior narration, imagines their lives as a play that he will mount in London, but he's not the only actor here. If the movie's director, Fred Schepisi, had approached the material more broadly—emphasizing the cruelty and deviousness of the three poseurs—the movie might have been more fun, but he stays close to White's soulful and ruminative tone, and "The Eye of the

Storm" turns into a brilliantly performed semi-dud.

The movie's structure is one of reminiscence and flashback, and it is meant to show us that Elizabeth Hunter, despite everything, is a remarkable woman. But what's offered as evidence isn't convincing, and a betrayal that is apparently at the heart of her relationship with her daughter is so dimly and distantly staged that it hardly seems worth all the emotions it stirs up. I quickly lost interest in "The Eye of the Storm" as a story, but I enjoyed watching the three pros working hard to bring life and insight to their loveless characters. Charlotte Rampling, speaking in not much more than a whisper, is magnetically evil, with occasional flashes of a complex sensibility and poetic invention—often just a flutter of her eyes or a strategic turn of her head. It's a great performance in search of better material. Judy Davis plays the frigid, frightened Dorothy, who is the most likable of the characters, with a bravura display of starts, fits, and tics. Basil is the shrewdest and the most worldly, and Geoffrey Rush, with his baritone amplitude and fondness for pomp, makes him a vain, hollow man, grasping at something that he knows has eluded him his entire life. (Whatever it is, it seems to have eluded the filmmakers, too.) Rush is so good that you almost wish that Schepisi had told the entire movie from Basil's point of view. ♦

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