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A Rebel Filmmaker Tilts Conservative

By TOM ROSTON

The director [Robert Stone](#) likened his discovery of nuclear power's positive potential to hearing the Sex Pistols for the first time: both opened worlds of possibility for him. It's a challenging comparison, but not surprising coming from Mr. Stone, who is trying to upend beliefs and expectations with his documentary "Pandora's Promise."

The film, which was released on Wednesday, seeks to counter more than 40 years of sentiment against nuclear power, some of which Mr. Stone, 54, has been responsible for himself. His credits include the Oscar-nominated "[Radio Bikini](#)" (1988), which examined the devastating effect of nuclear-bomb testing in the Pacific, and "Earth Days," a 2009 documentary honoring environmentalism in the United States.

The criticism often heaped on documentaries, and the independent film world that produces them, is that they preach to the choir. The few documentaries that speak to politically conservative-leaning audiences have had varying degrees of success seeking a foothold on the festival circuit. "Pandora's Promise," for instance, stood out at the Sundance and True/False film festivals.

On [Earth Day](#) this April, after driving from his home in Rhinebeck, N.Y., Mr. Stone spent time in a meeting room looking out on Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn, reminiscing about how on the first Earth Day, in 1970, he used his mother's Super 8 camera to make his first film, about the dawning of modern-day environmental consciousness. Mr. Stone's long career has included nonfiction films on Patty Hearst and the Kennedy assassination, as well as "World War III," a 1998 mockumentary he made for German television about a global nuclear war.

When "Earth Days" had its premiere at Sundance, an audience member asked Mr. Stone for his opinion on nuclear power. He deferred to one of his subjects, Stewart Brand, who is best known for creating "The Whole Earth Catalog" and who had become an advocate for [nuclear energy](#).

"The place went nuts," Mr. Stone said. "A hundred hands went up. I realized that this is the elephant in the room."

First, Mr. Stone said, he got his “head around the issue.” Convinced that global warming is an imminent danger and that wind and solar power could never supply enough energy to power the planet, he researched nuclear energy’s negatives and concluded that concerns about waste, terrorism and meltdowns were overblown.

The conflation of nuclear power with nuclear weapons had helped create a “skepticism that is very broad but very shallow,” Mr. Stone said. “But how do you finance a film that’s going against the whole ethos of the documentary community?”

He came up with a way to approach a wary congregation. “The film should mirror my own journey,” Mr. Stone said. “The story of conversion is a classic tale.” So “Pandora’s Promise” traces the emerging faith of several environmentalists in nuclear energy’s promise.

He cobbled together \$1.2 million from backers, particularly through Impact Partners, which provides documentary financing from individual investors. Mr. Stone said the money came mainly from wealthy “tech heads” who have worked in Silicon Valley.

He was skeptical, he said, that Sundance would accept his film. As Andrew Herwitz, the film’s sales agent, put it, “One assumes that the organizers have a very different point of view on nuclear energy.” He was referring indirectly to the festival’s founder, Robert Redford, an ardent environmentalist.

But the Sundance director, John Cooper, said, “We like films that create dialogue.” Asked whether Mr. Stone’s history — he has had three previous films at Sundance — was a factor, Mr. Cooper replied, “The credibility of a filmmaker does matter to us.”

Not all directors feel similarly embraced. Mr. Herwitz also represented “U.N. Me” (2009), in which the directors Ami Horowitz and Matthew Groff used satire to critique the United Nations.

Mr. Horowitz, a former investment banker, said he was disturbed by what he called “the weirdness” of the reaction that his film received from several festival programmers in the United States, none of whom accepted “U.N. Me.” He said that initial positive responses turned sour, and he accused Sky Sitney, the director of AFI Docs (the annual Maryland festival previously known as Silverdocs), of referring to him as a bigot and a racist to Mr. Herwitz.

Both Ms. Sitney and Mr. Herwitz dispute the claim.

“It’s fine to curate based on quality, but to do so on ideology is a very dangerous road,” Mr. Horowitz said.

Ms. Sitney, in a telephone interview, responded, "It's an absolute lie," and added: "That's shocking. I would never talk to anyone that way."

She said that she encouraged "new points of view" at her festival, citing as an example a screening and panel discussion of "Waiting for 'Superman,'" a 2010 documentary that criticized teachers' unions.

Mr. Herwitz supported Ms. Sitney's statement.

"Every filmmaker wants to look at why their film didn't get into a festival, and rarely do they think it has to do with the quality," he said. "But when you feel like an outlier, you act like an outlier."

Geoff Gilmore, the director of the [Tribeca Film Festival](#), said there's a reason festival documentaries tend to reflect a politically progressive point of view. "Conservatives have chosen different mediums, like radio and television," he said.

However that may be, Tribeca was confronted with an exception in Phelim McAleer, a documentary filmmaker who caused a minor stir this year when he and others were prevented from attending a festival screening of Josh Fox's "Gasland II," the second part in a documentary assault on fracking, the process to release gas from rock layers deep underground.

Mr. McAleer has challenged Mr. Fox's assertions with his own feature documentary, "[FrackNation](#)," which he didn't submit to festivals. The film, for which he was a co-director, is scheduled to be shown on [AXS TV](#) the night after "Gasland II" has its television premiere on HBO in July.

"I hate film festivals," Mr. McAleer said. "There is not one film shown that anyone would disagree with at a Manhattan dinner party."

"Pandora's Promise" is not an exception, Mr. McAleer said, adding: "Nuclear power has become semi-respectable among environmentalists. It's now a way of attacking coal and gas."

It wouldn't surprise Mr. McAleer, then, to hear that "Pandora's Promise" proved to be "not so contentious" during its festival run, said Mr. Stone, who polled audiences. "They were 75 percent anti-nuclear going in," he said, "and then 80 percent pronuclear going out. It was extraordinary."

Mr. McAleer, who also made a documentary critiquing the Al Gore global-warming documentary [“An Inconvenient Truth”](#) (an Oscar winner in 2007), is one of several filmmakers who attack pillars of the liberal establishment, whether it's President Obama (“2016: Obama's America”) or Michael Moore ([“Manufacturing Dissent”](#)).

But don't lump Mr. Stone in with them. “That's an outgrowth of right-wing punditry that should not be taken seriously,” said Mr. Stone, who calls Mr. Moore a friend.

“Pandora's Promise,” he said, was “not a left-right thing.”