

Halfway to the Promised Land

Promised Land (2012)

Director: Gus Van Sant

Producers: Chris Moore, Matt Damon, John Krasinski

Just out on DVD, *Promised Land* is a low-key, thoughtful drama that aims to unpick some of the human realities driving the US fracking social and economic phenomenon. It manages this with an admirable even-handedness and even sensitivity – but is let down by a truly unexpected plot twist that is likely to leave audiences head-scratching at best, but more likely questioning what message exactly they are supposed to take from the film.

Produced, co-written and acted by Hollywood’s Matt Damon, it prompted a somewhat knee-jerk reaction from the American Petroleum Institute who, in the run-up to the film’s 2012 release, orchestrated a discrediting campaign that focused heavily on the fact that the film was funded by Abu Dhabi Media (and therefore ipso facto biased). Given that the film is absolutely not a propaganda rant – both sides of the debate are given a good airing – and that a strong plot sub-theme is the skulduggery of big corporations and their misuse of public relations, audiences may conclude that

Matt Damon co-wrote, produced and starred in Promised Land



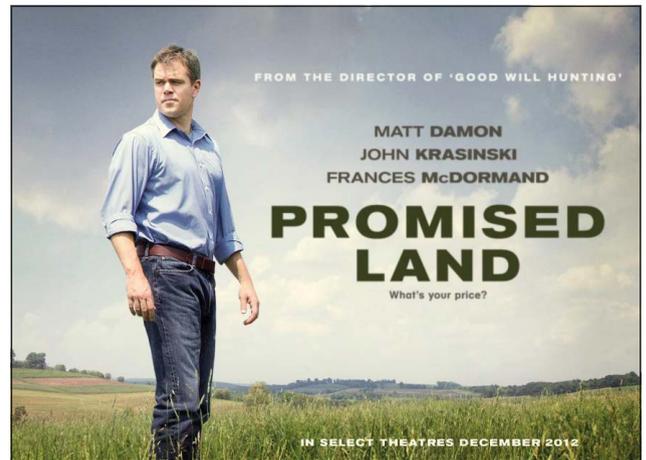
the API actually shot itself in the foot here.

Seeing Both Sides

The strength of the film is that the story is told through the eyes of two gas company reps (Matt Damon, Frances McDormand), two good people who have been given the job of signing up the rural folk of a recession-struck community in Pennsylvania. Matt Damon’s character, in particular, is convinced of the ‘rightness’ of his mission, having seen his grandfather’s home town decimated by poverty after the closure of one agriculture-related plant. “You all see it coming and you just don’t get out of the way... When all the help stops coming, you’ll remember this day,” he argues in frustration with a group of resistant farmers.

In fact fracking is accepted by both sides of the debate as the only alternative to rural poverty and loss of community: “I’m lucky to be old enough to have a shot at dying with my dignity,” says the retired, activist teacher with heart-felt resignation. Disempowerment and social inequality are ever-present themes, providing a sombre backdrop to the film. “How many wells you got up there in Manhattan?” asks one farmer. “The only reason you’re here is because we’re poor.”

The film touches on the other ‘no alternative’ argument, so rarely discussed. “You can’t be neutral here,” states Matt Damon’s character. “If you are against this, you are for coal and oil... unless we talk about cutting consumption and that’s a conversation none of us want to have.” Unfortunately, apart from a reference to “running everything on rainbows and happy thoughts” there’s no further investigation of this line of thinking – this is a Hollywood film, not a documentary, after all, but it leaves



the two sides of the debate as polarized as ever: if you want to drive a car, you have got to live with the technology.

Many of the ‘issues’ surrounding fracking are not dealt with – not methane release, earthquakes, water or infrastructure requirements, nor the longevity (or not) of wells. Water contamination is the focus of just one scene, where the ‘environmentalist’ attempts to explain fracking to a class of school children using a plastic bag, a spear and a toy farm. The anti-fracking argument is instead implied in Damon’s character’s journey from confident, motivated salesman, to “I’m not a bad guy” assertions, coupled with heavy drinking, to the rather oblique, mumbled admission that “We might be betting more than we think”.

Plot Twist

But even this message is lost in the bigger story of corporate venality and ‘just a job’ sales techniques. The plot twist that brings Damon’s character to his theatrical final change-of-heart can only leave an audience perplexed. It is a comment on corporations, not fracking, and depending on your personal take regarding big business, it either discredits the film greatly – or confirms your worst fears.

On the whole, this film is a watchable attempt to explain the down-on-the-ground realities of America’s shale boom to those of us who are far removed. Interestingly, in January this year Qatar announced that it will no longer seek to fund Hollywood films, so possibly the API criticism hit one of its marks – with no benefit to the US public. ■

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