



THE SCOTSMAN

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First things first

BEAR-FACED CHEEK

THE film opens with a familiar scene: a blond man in dark sunglasses and a wool cap, cooing to an uninterested creature grazing in the background. No, it's not Timothy Treadwell, the self-anointed bear guardian who spent 13 summers living among grizzlies in Alaska only to be eaten by them. Instead, it's the mop-headed Jonathon Snackwell, a bewildered animal lover who lives among the docile sheep of New Zealand for eight days, only to die of "wool-related allergies".

Comedian Jeff Richards plays the runny-nosed Snackwell in *Sheep Man*, an irreverent new mockumentary that pokes fun at *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog's award-winning documentary about Treadwell's bizarre life and death. A collaboration with LA director Ron Eigen, a veteran of *Saturday Night Live*, it raises the comedic question: how long must we wait before we can laugh at tragedy?

Herzog's 2005 documentary showed Treadwell as an obsessed bear fan convinced his love for the animals would keep him safe as he lived, ate and slept among them. For the makers of *Sheep Man*, enough time has passed to laugh at the absurdity of such scenes. "You have to push some boundaries at different times to see where those lines are," says Eigen. "It's sad when people die, but it's hilarious the way some people die," adds Richards.

They're not the only ones with this attitude. On the internet you can already find several *Grizzly Man* spoofs. But *Sheep Man* is the first such spoof to make the jump to the film festival circuit - it's already been screened in New Zealand and LA.

If you think this is all in poor taste, you might wish to know that one of Treadwell's biggest supporters thinks it's OK to laugh. Jewel Palovak, executive director of *Grizzly People*, the preservationist group Treadwell founded, is not offended. "I have a dark sense of humour," she says. "I take this stuff with a grain of salt. I know that Timothy wouldn't want to be the butt of a joke, but - what is it that they always say? - imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

THINGS TO BRAGG ABOUT

BILLY Bragg's new book, he concedes, may have been partly prompted by the sight of a milestone birthday heaving into view next year. "I am approaching 50 and I did have that Paul Weller moment - you know, 'has my fire gone out?' In the past I only had a quiver of songs to show you how passionate I am. Well, look in WH Smith's now - there's a big, fat 80,000-word book proving my fire is still burning bright."

The *Progressive Patriot* is all about how we can work and live together, and it is Bragg's chief preoccupation at the moment. A personal history of our mongrel race and its attempts at creating a fair, just society through such reforms as Magna Carta and the creation of the welfare state, it culminates in a call for a bill of rights to enshrine "British values" for Brits of every race and creed.

Bragg is a committed campaigner against racism. His new tour, which comes to Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen in December, is called *Hope Not Hate*, and will raise the profile of five anti-fascist

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organisations he supports. He was shocked into the idea of writing the book when the BNP won a council seat in his native Barking in 2004, but it was the 7 July bombings that were the real spur.

"Those evil men did more damage to social cohesion in this country than the British National Party and the NF did in the past 40 years," he says. "After that, there was a debate about the failure of multiculturalism and the need to return to 'British values'. But there is no definition of British values, no single document you can hold up and say, these are our beliefs. All I came up with was the idea of fairness."

He's drawn some conclusions his fans might find surprising. He thinks ID cards are a fair idea - if counterbalanced by a bill of rights. He thinks it is OK to ask a Muslim woman to remove her veil if she is to teach children. Less surprising, perhaps, is his assertion that "not just the government, but the entire political class" failed to gauge the depth of resentment to the Iraq War, which he believes motivated the 7/7 bombers.

"It was because they wanted to protect our country." He approved of Sir Richard Dannatt speaking out in favour of withdrawing from Iraq: "But he should have told Bush."

SCREEN SHOTS

JUST out in the US is *The War Tapes*, a new documentary shot primarily by US soldiers in Fallujah with cameras fixed to their gun turrets and to dashboards. It opens with footage of a gun battle and terrifying calls of "Sergeant Smith's down!", a frightening but familiar scene from a war that is now - thanks to portable technology and the Internet - considered the most scrutinised in history. *War Tapes* is the latest in a string of Iraq documentaries: *My Country, My Country*; *The Ground Truth*; *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* and *Iraq in Fragments*. The issue now is finding an audience.

While the glut of bleak war footage isn't an easy sell to already desensitised audiences, these films offer more intimate views of war that give context to the chaos. *War Tapes* and *The Ground Truth* tell the wrenching stories of Iraq war veterans. Both *Iraq in Fragments* and *My Country, My Country* reveal the Iraqi perspective under US occupation. *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* shows the human cost of using corporations in Iraq to do the job of government.

War Tapes came about after director Deborah Scranton negotiated a deal to give cameras to US soldiers headed to Fallujah in March 2004. The Army's main caveat was that the soldiers had to volunteer. Ten of the 180 soldiers asked did; three - Sgt Steve Pink, Sgt Zack Bazzi, and Spc Michael Moriarty - ended up in the film.

Pink says he's still struck by how their black humour plays to cinema audiences. "In the beginning, they're laughing along with us," he says. "And then towards the end, we're saying things that are funny to us out of necessity and that really aren't funny to them at all anymore. You see the way that you become really cynical."

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