



# SKEWED BUT SKILLED SKEWERING OF GM

*Rookie film maker's 'Roger and Me' takes a pointed and poignant look at the layoffs of the '80s—at the expense of the auto giant's chairman*

By Jeff Vettraino

It's a rare film that focuses on the auto industry. It's almost as rare when a director's first feature garners great acclaim—and controversy. But that's what former journalist Michael Moore has done with *Roger and Me*.

Moore and his movie are blatant in their viewpoint. Balanced it is not. When it's over, we can hardly miss the point: The dislocation—the suffering—caused by structural changes in American industry raise basic questions about our economic system.

Moore, unfortunately, does not give viewers sufficient information to rationally and intelligently deal with those questions.

The thread that winds through *Roger and Me* is Moore's search for Roger Smith. "My mission was a simple one," Moore says: ask GM's chairman to come to Flint, Mich., and see the devastation 30,000 layoffs have wrought to what essentially had been a factory town.

As Moore pursues Smith, as he's chased from the General Motors Building and booted from the exclusive Detroit Athletic Club by a prissy manager, the viewer also sees slices of life in crumbling Flint.

Some of the slices are humorous, but the humor can be very dark.

Rats have surpassed Flint's human population by 50,000, a newscaster reports.

When *Nightline* examines Flint's plight, Ted Koppel suddenly disappears from the TV screen. A local reporter learns why: an unemployed autoworker has driven off in ABC's truck carrying the satellite uplink.

While the jobless wait in line at a plasma donor center, Moore interviews women at a local country club. Most of the unemployed are lazy, says one golfer. And Flint is still "a fine place" to live. "We love the



In Flint area, the locale of director Michael Moore's first feature film, Moore saves a seat at the opening for GM's Roger Smith, 'star' of the documentary

of the U.S. auto industry. But it does point out the disparity between the industry's have and have-nots.

And its portrayal of Smith is not flattering.

The year the dole rolls in Flint include half its population, Smith gets a \$2-million raise, according to Moore. The film maker sneaks into a board meeting posing as a GM stockholder, but Smith quickly adjourns things when Moore reaches the podium to speak.

But at no point does *Roger and Me* show us GM's new engineering and technology center, opened on the site of Flint's old Fisher One plant. It doesn't mention that the creation of the Buick City assembly

stores—what's left of 'em," she adds.

Moore also presents some of the cures prescribed for Flint: the city promotes the manufacture of sticky rollers for cleaning lint off clothes, retrains line workers for employment at Taco Bell and builds an automotive theme park that closes within a year of opening.

At one point, Moore tells us, civic leaders turn to the divine for salvation. Officials pay evangelist Robert Schuler \$20,000 to ask the Lord to end the city's woes.

And then there's the woman who has her own means of making ends meet. "Pets or Meat," the sign at her front door reads. She raises rabbits in pens behind her house. One minute she playfully strokes a bunny. The next she clubs it with a pipe and strings it up.

Some critics have accused Moore of twisting events to his own purposes. The incidents in the film occurred throughout the 1980s, they say, and not during the two-and-a-half-year period that Moore pursues Smith.

Those who say Moore takes facts out of sequence are right. *Roger and Me* isn't fair. Moore didn't intend an even-handed analysis

complex has resulted in one of the nation's most efficient plants, one which makes some of its highest quality products. Nor does it mention the competition that has forced the moves, the layoffs on GM.

Moore's story certainly is more poignant for it. But what of the need of informed opinion on such weighty matters as layoffs, international competition and the state of U.S. manufacturing? What of moviegoers who will form judgments of Smith, GM and the industry without benefit of all the facts or seeing both sides of the issues?

Moore finally corners Smith as, quoting Dickens, the chairman addresses GM's executive Christmas party. Meanwhile, we see a Flint family evicted from its home—gifts, tree and trimmings and all.

Smith tells Moore that GM bears no responsibility for the eviction. The movie ends, and we are left to think.

And that's what *Roger and Me* is designed to make us do. Moore accomplishes that artfully. What he doesn't do is what he wants Smith to do: accept responsibility. ■

Joe Wissens photo