

Wildfire: Feel the Heat

The IMAX experience has been available to D.C. residents for some years now at the National Air and Space Museum, beginning with the stirring *To Fly* of many years ago right up to the current hit *Everest*, which has become one of the country's top grossing films even though it is only shown at a few dozen venues. With March (1999) comes two novelties on the IMAX front in Washington. The city's second IMAX screen will be unveiled at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History (featuring a new film on the African elephant, to be reviewed later), and the latest in IMAX productions, *Wildfire: Feel the Heat*, a thrilling look at the people and methods that fight forest fires, at the Air and Space Museum's Langley Theater.

Wildfire offers a kaleidoscope of the kinds of flaming disasters which can threaten our natural and urban habitats: timber fires, brush fires, lightning fires, residential fires, etc. -- all of which require different techniques to attack and conquer (all of the sequences were shot in the Western U.S., except for one in Australia). We get an intimate, first-hand look at how each blaze must be handled, whether by parachuting into a forest area, putting down fire lines to stop the spread of a brush fire, or launching of retardant into an inaccessible grove. We get up close and personal with these firefighters, almost smelling the smoke and feeling the heat waves coming off that immense screen.

This effect of being almost literally in the boots of the firefighters is the real triumph of *Wildfire*. Director Michael Slee and his 15-person film crew achieved it by becoming firemen themselves. In order to gain access to the crews, equipment, aircraft, and helicopters of the U.S. Forest Service and other entities, they had to take and pass mandatory fire fighting training to be qualified to go into and above the fire zones. The team also utilized eleven specially designed camera mounts on tile various fire fighting aircraft to capture views never seen before.

Director Slee noted in an Interview that the technology of large format filmmaking "is the most cumbersome, archaic, complicated and unreliable ... in the world. It's also the most beautiful, spectacular and stunning. The technology runs completely counter to your desire to move quickly and deftly." In a circumstance when one cameraman would be desirable, Slee said it took three people, each in fire suits, to move the 50 pound camera and film. In addition, each IMAX film magazine can only shoot three minutes, which means plenty of magazine switching in the middle of a blaze. The filmmakers' own extraordinary personal commitment to their work--and to that of the firefighters--allows their audience to witness some spectacular footage, such as smoke jumpers twirling off into the void over burning pines, close-ups of the cutting of flaming trunks to form a firebreak, or billows of red retardant bursting from the belly of a fire plane.

Perhaps the most evocative footage in a film full of it is an extended sequence showing a giant air crane (the kind that plucked the statue of Freedom from the Capitol dome a few years ago) drooping an enormous, pliable hose into a pond, sucking up water as into an elephant's trunk, then whirling off to dump its

load on a forest fire. Audience members even get to play "Firecam" when the crane drops one dose of water cargo right on to the camera!

Like most IMAX films, *Wildfire* is reportage rather than narrative. The film's point of view, expressed through the (sometimes orotund) narration by Andre Braugher, is a hymn of praise to the firefighters, to their training, expertise, and sacrifice. Though the movie may seem at times like a commercial for the Forest Service, one can only sympathize with its viewpoint, since the Service and its officers form a crucial bastion protecting us from the millions of acres lost to wildfires each year.

Commissioned and produced by Discovery Pictures (associated with the cable channel), the material of *Wildfire* will before long appear in television documentaries on Discovery and The Learning Channel. The IMAX film, it should be noted, is short--some 40 minutes--and certainly does leave you wanting more. The eventual television presentations should be able to expand and deepen the coverage of the firefighters' work. For real impact, though, you will not be able to beat *Wildfire: Feel the Heat* on the Very Big Screen.

In watching these firefighters' work, what we know to be so draining for them is, at the same time, so exhilarating for us to see.
(*The film is intended for family viewing, though little kids might be scared by some fire scenes.*)

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