

VARIETY

Film Reviews

New U.S. Release

16 Acres

(Documentary)

By JOHN ANDERSON

A Tanaxis Prods. presentation. Produced by Mike Marcucci. Co-producer, Matt Kapp. Directed, edited by Richard Hankin. Written by Matt Kapp.

With: George Pataki, Michael Bloomberg, Rosaleen Tallon, Larry Silverstein, Philip Nobel, Scott Raab, Daniel Libeskind, David Childs, Michael Arad.

Gimlet-eyed and caustic under a facade of civility, "16 Acres" takes a potentially tedious story -- the predictably tiresome catfight over the rebuilding of the World Trade Center -- and turns it into an uncommonly engrossing and articulate documentary. Renowned editor Richard Hankin, helming only his second nonfiction feature, razes much of the faux nobility erected around the rebuilding of Ground Zero, an 11-years-plus reconstruction process that was supposed to represent defiance in the face of terrorism, but instead signifies politics at its worst. With a bit of marketing spin, the pic's appeal could be widespread and unconventional.

From the opening bars of Bob Dylan warbling "Everything Is Broken," Hankin constructs a polished, appealing surface atop a story of enormous sadness, one made worse by craven public posturing. The film does take a few minutes to find its narrative groove; it's not clear at first what the objective is, and Hankin leaps to a few debatable assumptions about the impact of the World Trade Center's loss on New York's sense of identity and day-to-day life.

Nonetheless, "16 Acres" has a proper sense of proportion, noting that the families of 9/11 victims had, and have, a right to see that the site properly honors their lost loved ones, and often-reviled developer Larry Silverstein had a legitimate interest in rebuilding commercial properties in Lower Manhattan, especially considering the tens of millions a month he had to pay the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey whether there were buildings on the site or not.

Hankin and writer/co-producer Matt Kapp don't downplay the bureaucratic rat's nest that had to be negotiated by anyone trying to get something going at Ground Zero. Nor do they ignore the idea that the entire enterprise was, in the words of architecture critic Philip Nobel, "a festering mess of selfish infighting." (The docu could have used a few more objective voices; Nobel and fellow writer Scott Raab are the only interviewees not connected to one WTC project or another.)

But they certainly don't let any of the politicians off the hook, notably Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who declared shortly after 9/11 that the whole of the WTC site should be considered sacred ground, knowing full well it was an unworkable-bordering-on-absurd idea. Gov. George Pataki, whose appearance in the film demonstrates a disconnect of epic proportions, presided over multiple groundbreaking and one ridiculous "dedication of a cornerstone" (such office towers don't have cornerstones, someone points out), while making sure the project went as slowly or quickly as was politically expedient for him. Hankin doesn't assail anyone outright; his editing allows people to bury themselves.

Not everyone is unsympathetic. Rosaleen Tallon, whose firefighter brother died in the rescue efforts, is a likable representative of all who lost family in the attack, even if she sometimes seems blinkered to the realities of devoting so much of the world's most valuable real estate to commemorating the dead. Architectural designer Daniel Libeskind, and David Childs, the architect of the erstwhile "Freedom Tower" (a name Pataki gave the building without consulting anyone, and which has since been erased), are sad examples of the kinds of public artists whose ideas are gradually diminished into parody by too much public input. Likewise Michael Arad, the Israeli-born city architect who won the competition for design of the WTC memorial; the political nitpicking at his concept recalls Maya Lin and her design of the Vietnam memorial in Washington.

It would be a stretch to call "16 Acres" a suspense thriller, although it certainly raises a question as to whether anything is ever going to be accomplished at Ground Zero. The movie prefers to take the attitude that the cacophony of voices trying to be heard over the political realities of reconstructing Lower Manhattan are somehow in keeping with the character of New York City, but that's the kind of spin the city doesn't need.

Tech credits are tops, as Hankin's editing and Tony Rossi's lensing create a kind of immaculate surface under which violent emotions are allowed free rein.

Camera (color), Tony Rossi; music, Max Avery Lichtenstein, Chris George; sound, David "Sharkey" Pruger, Edward L. O'Connor, Michael Jones, Mike Reilly, David Hocs, Daniel Brooks; sound mixer, Quentin Chiappetta. Reviewed online, New York, Nov. 11, 2012. Running time: 92 MIN.