

Documentary Shows Division Over Wal-Mart

Written by Tamara Straus

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In 1998, David Glass, the chief operating officer of Wal-Mart, outlined his company's objective: "First we dominate North America, then South America, then Europe and Asia." If Glass had been speaking of any other enterprise, his words might have seemed far-fetched. But Wal-Mart's growth since 1962 actually has resembled a blitzkrieg. The largest retailer in the world has 3,000 stores in the U.S. as well as chains in Britain, Germany, China, Korea, Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. It opens a mega-store every two days. It is the U.S.'s largest private employer, with 925,000 people on the payroll, and the second-largest employer in general after the federal government. The company also boasts the largest computer, surpassing the Pentagon's, and the world's largest fleet of trucks. Wal-Mart might as well appear in the dictionary under the word "huge."

I know the above statistics because I just watched *Store Wars: When Wal-Mart Comes to Town*, a documentary film by Micha Peled that will air on PBS beginning this week. (WQPT in the Quad Cities will broadcast the documentary on Thursday, June 7, at 9 p.m.)

Store Wars

is not exactly a critique of Wal-Mart's business practices, but it is hard to come away with a favorable view of the company, which lines its proposals with million-dollar incentives to cash-strapped towns and then threatens to move its mega-store to Town B if Town Council A says no.

Peled's documentary makes clear that part of Wal-Mart's savvy has been to provide funds to towns in the absence of adequate state and federal money. "The only way most American towns can cover their budget today is by having big corporations like Wal-Mart come in and bring tax revenues," said Peled in a telephone interview. "Ever since the Reagan era, American municipalities have been scrambling for additional revenue sources."

Peled is an odd candidate for the very American story of Wal-Mart. He grew up in an Israeli farm town called Ganey-Yehuda about an hour's drive from Tel Aviv. His mother fled Nazi

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Germany. His first documentary was called *Teatro Latino*. His last two films examined native themes: Israeli-Palestinian relations and Jewish settlers in the West Bank.

But Peled is an avid analyzer of the U.S. He's also lived here for the past 25 years and spent the first few wandering the States with Kerouac's *On the Road* in-hand. "Ganey Yehuda" means "Judas' Garden," and perhaps growing up in a place that connotes betrayal and land struggle prepared him better than most for American turf wars.

"I wanted to tell the story of a town that is anywhere USA because that story has not really been told," Peled said. In Ashland, Virginia, where *Store Wars* is set, he found that place. The town of 7,200 looks like a latter-day Norman Rockwell painting and basically epitomizes what's left of small-town American life – which might be the main reason Ashland was torn asunder by Wal-Mart's proposal to come to town. Not since the Civil War or the civil-rights movement, it seems, have Ashlanders experienced such fierce public debate. In

Store Wars

one can witness street protests led by a group called the Pink Flamingos, late-night discussions over homemade pies, and the inevitable political maneuverings among prominent citizens and elected officials.

Act One of *Store Wars* ends with Ashland rejecting Wal-Mart's offer, and with it comes a sense of relief. But with the company's second proposal, which included a \$3 million investment for road repairs, the town council caved, even though the majority of Ashlanders remained opposed. Tears were shed by Pink Flamingo members; others chalked up the decision to the realities of small-town economics.

If there is an appropriate activity to preface the watching of *Store Wars*, it is an afternoon visit to both the local mega-store and the local grocer. For the documentary illustrates just what the implications of those visits are: One offers convenience, needed jobs, and the new style of American consumption; the other the shopping of the recent past – in a local retail economy – which companies like Wal-Mart tend to wipe out.

And in case you don't have an opinion about the Wal-Mart-versus-mom-and-pop-store debate, *Store Wars* offers a cast of characters who do. There is Sharon McKinley, a matronly Southerner whose husband and daughter work at Wal-Mart and who argues the store is a boon to people with limited free time and a tight budget. There is the straight-laced Keith Morris, a Wal-Mart director of community relations, who comes to Ashland to convince the town folk of Wal-Mart's sweet deal. And there is Al Norman, a bearded activist and founder of a group called Sprawl Busters, who argues, "Wal-Mart operates on a saturation strategy. They place stores so close together that they become their own competition. Once everyone else is wiped out, they're free to thin out their own stores. Wal-Mart currently has over 390 empty stores on the market today. This is a company that changes stores as casually as you or I change shoes."

That's America, you might say. But in the end, Micha Peled would prefer if it were not. He is nostalgic for the regional variety he experienced on his Kerouacian journey of the '70s. "I was stunned by the scope of the problem," he said, referring to the homogenization of American towns. "And I was stunned that until I read about Wal-Mart in a book on globalization, I didn't

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know anything about how the company works at all.”

Still, Peled sympathizes with towns that have fallen in with Goliaths like Wal-Mart: “They’re essentially blackmailed. If the towns don’t take on a Wal-Mart, Wal-Mart will move their new store two miles up the road out of the town’s jurisdiction and still suffer the same economic devastation.”

Store Wars also illustrates that Wal-Mart is not universally hated. Peled’s Ashlanders note that the company offers low-income people needed jobs. What they don’t say, however, is that Wal-Mart’s jobs do not provide a “living wage” – a salary that can adequately cover the costs of rent, food, and health insurance. According to research institutes like Jobs for Justice and United for a Fair Economy, one-third of Wal-Mart’s employees work part-time with no benefits or job security. Many employees also are limited to less than 28 hours a week, and therefore are not eligible for benefits at all.

This is the other vicious cycle – of unsupportable wages – that *Store Wars* does not have time to tell. Nor does the film examine in much detail the race and class divisions raised by the Wal-Mart debate – the way, for example, low-income African-Americans in Ashland view Wal-Mart versus upper-class whites.

But *Store Wars* will be useful to people who have faced or will deal with the same dilemmas experienced by those in Ashland. In fact, Peled has been holding public screenings in places (such as a Quad Cities Interfaith event in Davenport) where Wal-Mart is trying to come to town or build a bigger store.

“I believe in something Arthur Miller once said,” he concluded, referring to his outreach efforts. “‘Every piece of art should bring news,’ – and news in the broadest sense of the word.”

Store Wars, which won a Golden Gate Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival, does bring news – the broad and disturbing sort.

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