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Vessel Review [Hot Docs 2014]

April 25, 2014 Adam A. Donaldson 0



There was an episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer gets his hands on Mr. Burns' yacht and takes it out to international waters where the rules are loose and the monkey knife fights are plentiful. It's a cute gag, but for thousands of women around the world, taking a boat to international waters is the only way they can have a safe, medical abortion. *Vessel* chronicles roughly 10 years in the life of Women on Waves, an organization that started with a cockamamie idea to outfit a boat to be a traveling abortion clinic, and turned into a global organization dedicated to helping women in need, no matter where they are.

Normally, when you see these movies about activists on the high seas, it's Greenpeace or some other environmental group, but for Women on Waves, the seas can be just as choppy. Dutch Doctor Rebecca Gomperts couldn't have imagined that it would be so, with a cupful of

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affirmation of the power (as Theodore Roosevelt once said) of speaking softly and carrying a big stick. For Women on Waves, the stick is knowledge and empowerment, and they wield it with great finesse in spite of early setbacks and ongoing challenges.



Considering the incredible controversy of abortion, *Vessel* has a light touch that's neither preachy nor lecturing in spite of the fact that this is an advocacy film. It makes a simple case that every woman's reproductive rights are unassailable, and the inventiveness, organization and dedication of the Women on Waves is impressive to watch. Director Diana Whitten does a good job taking the complexities of the issue, and years of activity, and unfurling it into a compact and punchy narrative that makes you believe one boat full of people can truly change the world.

Vessel covers about 10 years in the life of the organization, and the lives of these women, and it's a decade that sees a lot of changes for them and in the battles they're fighting. Abortion laws end up becoming more relaxed in many of the places they visit, but there are setbacks as well. Again though, the focus here is on the positivity, and not on the blame game.

Maybe this movie was just in my wheel house politically and philosophically, but really I feel that *Vessel* takes a highly galvanizing topic and presents it in a way that should translate to people no matter how they feel about the subject matter. In other words, it is a true underdog story, and like all good underdog stories, you cheer on the underdog to victory.

Vessel is a sturdy and sea-worthy documentary that takes its very serious subject matter, and covers it in a direct, but delicate fashion.

Rating

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demelzabunny — Ditto Juditanne!

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Paul — It's really not that hard, just make it similar in style to a western or samurai film. Yojimbo in Space.

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