

IN HARM'S WAY: PRESERVING THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Four-legged creatures need protection, too

By PAIGE DONNER

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be measured by the way in which its animals are treated."

The quote is from Gandhi but, coincidentally enough, it was cited by both Christine Ebersole, the Tony Award-winning star of "Grey Gardens," and another Broadway icon, Bernadette Peters, to express how deeply they feel about animal rights.

"When you're made aware of animal exploitation for big business, it's unconscionable," Ebersole says. "Animal research is completely unnecessary. We don't have the same biochemistry as rats."

Although animal-rights activists have targeted everything from the fur trade to the humane treatment of livestock, people like Ebersole, Peters and others are focusing on the less conspicuous, more pervasive aspects of animal cruelty. She champions groups such as Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (pcrm.org) and other such sites like the vegan-oriented vegetarian-shoesandbags.com as entities committed to the fair treatment of animals.

"My 11-year-old daughter now identifies beauty products that do animal testing and those that don't," Ebersole says. "My entire



White



Q

family is committed to only purchasing consumer goods not tested on animals."

Asian film star Maggie Q concurs: "The kids, too, need to make the connection because we're leaving this world behind for them."

Q, who co-starred in "Mission: Impossible III," is a co-producer along with singer-actress Persia White of "Earthlings," an animal-rights documentary narrated by Joaquin Phoenix that was released in 2005. Work on its sequel, "Unity," began Nov. 1. "This is how we stop things, by our choices," Q says.

"I think it's very important that people learn that ending violence starts in our homes," adds White, who is active in the Human Society of the United States (hsus.org) and also with Sea Shepherd, a whale conservation society. "We need the help of everyday citizens who refuse to stand by and allow multimillion-dollar industries to profit from pain and suffering. I see a clear connection in our attitudes toward life, violence, animals and nature."

Animal rescue is also among the big issues of animal-rights concerns. Peters and Mary Tyler Moore co-founded Broadway Barks nearly 10 years ago in New York City. The pet adoption drive takes place each summer in Shubert Alley in Manhattan.

"People are getting the message," Peters enthuses. "Last summer we had 130 pets from 26 shelters, and 100 of them were adopted."



Gary Gershoff/WireImage.com

DOGS' LIFE: Christine Ebersole, above, and Bernadette Peters and Mary Tyler Moore, left, attend separate Broadway Barks events to encourage New Yorkers to adopt stray pets.

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saying anything publically for or against the war. Some, such as Elizabeth Hasselbeck of "The View," have spoken only in defense or support of U.S. troops without praising or criticizing the mission. Others, such as Cher, have focused on helping troops get adequate equipment — in Cher's case, lobbying for more and better body armor.

But for a number of actresses and femme filmmakers, the Iraq war has become a catalyst for political action — either on the stump, with their checkbook or in their work.

"There's a greater variety of ways to speak out now," says Lara Bergthold, a founder of the now-defunct Hollywood Women's Action Committee in the 1980s. The advent of the Internet alone has provided new outlets — either on blogs or through electronic cash donations to activist groups — that didn't exist for the

most part even 16 years ago, when the first Persian Gulf war raged.

Similarly, films with a critical or antiwar point of view are hitting theaters sooner than before. The first features questioning U.S. involvement in Vietnam — "Coming Home" and "The Deer Hunter" in 1978, followed by "Apocalypse Now" in 1979 — appeared several years after a cease-fire. As the situation in Iraq continues to bleed with no end in sight, at least three documentaries and three features taking a dim view of the war are either in theaters or about to be released.

One of those, "In the Valley of Elah," features Susan Sarandon, who has made it a priority to bring attention to U.S. vets who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and are now suffering from inadequate treatment by the military or the government.

"Whether you believed in the war or not, ignoring what's happening to these veterans, who lack real support, it's not

right," she says.

Shortly after "Elah" was released, Sarandon was asked to appear on ABC's "The View." She agreed, she says, only if she could bring at least one veteran on with her. She says she will "keep plugging away" at this issue as long as necessary.

Will the 2008 presidential election change anything, especially if

a Democrat wins? Sarandon isn't hopeful. "The key issues are authenticity and standing by a principle," she says, adding that, on those counts, "I'm disappointed in most of the candidates right now."

For Patricia Foulkrod, director of the documentary "The Ground Truth," the Iraq war "transcends the election," she

says, "because elections are ways for people to say to themselves, 'Oh, there's an election coming. That'll fix things.' But there's no sitting back to see how this all plays out."

Thus, she is now working on a doc about the effects of war on American, Iraqi and Afghani families. "We are in a war," Foulkrod says. "What else is more important?"

Laura Poitras, who directed the Oscar-nominated doc "My Country, My Country," says that "this war is going to haunt us for generations. So I wanted to document it for the record and also capture something about the human consequences."

She says she never expected to change official policy, "but maybe reach people emotionally across the political spectrum." Like Sarandon, Poitras doesn't see much courage on the subject

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WAR AT HOME: Susan Sarandon plays an aggrieved mother whose enlisted son is missing in Paul Haggis' "In the Valley of Elah."



Poitras