

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## Moore targets benumbed nation

## His own dulled reaction to Columbine led to film

By Michael Giltz  
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CANNES, France — A phone call woke director Michael Moore on his birthday in April. It was the Cannes Film Festival. He'd sent them a copy of his new movie "Bowling for Columbine," hoping perhaps for a midnight slot or a sidebar screening, something, anything to bring attention to a documentary film that didn't even have an American distributor.

"How would you feel if we put this film in competition?" Moore was asked.

"Thank you," Moore said, and he's been thanking them ever since. The movie, a very serious but very funny film that uses the tragedy of Columbine as a springboard to discuss America's "culture of fear," had its official premiere Friday, getting a huge, emotional 13-minute standing ovation from the European audience that one observer deemed "a total lovefest."

Earlier that day, the 48-year-old Moore — married to his creative partner and producer Kathleen Glynn — was basking in perhaps the best reviews of his career. Typical of the overseas press was Screen International's critic who called the film a "wide-ranging, often shockingly funny documentary that balances a wicked wit with serious insight."

The U.S. praise was equally laudatory, with the trade paper Variety pegging "Bowling for Columbine" a "a rollicking, incendiary documenta-

ry" and The Hollywood Reporter raving that Moore had created "a flat-out brilliant cinematic essay on the issue of violence and guns in American society."

So it's no surprise that one of the best days in Moore's life was capped by the announcement that United Artists had picked up the film for North America, probably for a slot sometime this fall. The price was a reported \$3 million.

Earlier, the affable Moore, dressed in jeans, a baggy shirt and a baseball cap talked about the roots of his most mature and provocative movie yet. Moore's one concession to Cannes was wearing sunglasses throughout the interview.

For many Americans, Columbine has receded to a name on a long list of tragedies, like Paducah, Ky., and 9/11. But Moore says he knows where he was on April 20, 1999, when Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold fatally shot 12 students and a teacher before taking their own lives. Sadly, he remembers it so well because a massacre at a school was becoming almost commonplace.

"I remember exactly what I was doing," says Moore. "I walked into work. It was on the big TV we have in our kitchen at work. Everybody was gathered around it. I said, 'What's going on?' Someone said, 'There's been a school shooting in Colorado.' I just kept walking into the office. Just another shooting."

Moore's film is a plea to resist being inured to such violence but to also



Associated Press / Lionel Cironneau

American director Michael Moore at the screening of his film 'Bowling for Columbine' on Friday in Cannes, France.

avoid the fear engendered by the media, he says, and the government. Moore's passion would take him far and wide, to the home of James Nichols, brother of Oklahoma City bombing co-conspirator Terry Nichols, as well as the estate of NRA president Charlton Heston. But he knew it would begin, at least symbolically, with the people in unincorporated Jefferson County. Initially, he admits, no one wanted to see more camera crews.

"Yes, but they understood I was not more 'media coverage' because I'm not part of the mainstream media that's just going to do the same old story. I found it quite easy to go around and talk to people, whether it was Lockheed or people involved in the shooting."

Moore pays a visit to defense con-

tractor Lockheed but takes issue with anyone who suggests he's making any facile leaps.

"Lockheed, the largest weapons manufacturer in the country, is the No. 1 employer in (the area) . . . and therefore we had the Columbine massacre? That's not what I'm saying," says Moore.

"I'm just saying all of us, all Americans, not just the people in Littleton but all Americans, should look at how the culture of violence is woven into the fabric of our society in such a way that we don't even think about it."

Born in Flint, Mich., Moore first gained notoriety by running for the local school board while still a high school student. (The voting age had just been lowered.) His platform? Fire the principal. Moore was elected, and the principal turned in his

resignation. Moore's national breakout came with "Roger & Me," one of the top-grossing documentaries of all time and a movie that he says forced General Motors to delay any more plant closings in Moore's hometown for several years.

Moore's next movie, "The Big One," persuaded Nike to change its overseas labor practices. (The company pledged to hire workers only 18 years of age and older.) His TV shows "The Awful Truth" and "TV Nation" won Emmys. His books, including his latest, "Stupid White Men," are best sellers.

But Moore's scope of ambition has widened considerably with "Bowling for Columbine." His press conference at Cannes before the film's premiere was impassioned political theater. He discussed America's "culture of fear," typified by local news media that radically increases its coverage of violent crime ("If it bleeds, it leads") in an era when such crime is substantially lower. And when one journalist asks Moore if he believes the Bush administration is cynically using 9/11 to further its political agenda, the moderator jokingly tells Moore he only has "one hour to answer that question."

"To use the dead of that day as a cover to push their right-wing agenda, to shred the Constitution, to distract people from Enron, I think it's immoral. I think it's abhorrent," says Moore.

When asked "why" Columbine happened, or why other massacres took place in France and Germany recently, Moore says people trying to blame violent movies or music or even the availability of handguns are wrong.

"There have always been insane people," he says, "and there will always be insane acts."