

Drop Dead Gorgeous

The beauty pageant and other ugly American phenomena—winning by any means necessary

James Brewer
7 August 1999

Beauty contests are an easy target for sarcasm, so before seeing the film, one might not expect too much from *Drop Dead Gorgeous*. Surprisingly, however, it goes beyond the mere lampooning of a small-town American beauty pageant. It begins to lay bare the connections between these superficial and banal manifestations of Americana and the underlying sickness of the society that nurtures them. The documentary style of the film, using hand-held, intrusive camerawork, provides an in-your-face portrait of this insidious ingredient of American culture.

Mount Rose, Minnesota is the home of a beauty pageant called the "Sarah Rose Miss Teen Princess America Pageant." As soon as the film opens, it is apparent that this is a different sort of film. Everyone is acutely aware of the presence of the camera and the crew behind it. Kirsty Alley, as Gladys Leeman, president of the Mount Rose Civil Servettes and the mother of a contestant, tells the camera in an outrageous Minnesota accent, "Yah, I think you boys'll find that things are different here in Mount Rose. For one thing, we're God fearin' folk, every last one of us. You won't find a back room in our video store."

Patriotism is at the heart of Mount Rose's pageant. Gladys makes this clear when she is asked about the pageant's theme. She replies: "Proud to be an American."

"What was the theme of last year's pageant?"

"Buy American."

"Can you recall the previous year's?"

"Amer I can," she proclaims, adding proudly that she thought of that one herself.

One by one, the contestants introduce themselves. They tell the interviewer why they are entering the competition for Miss Teen Princess. Amber Atkins (Kirsten Dunst) lives in a trailer park with her single mother and works as a makeup artist for cadavers in a funeral home. She

explains, "Guys get outta Mount Rose all the time for hockey scholarships ... and prison. But the pageant's kinda my only chance." Becky Leeman (Denise Richards), Gladys's pampered daughter, cannot present the same argument, since she already has everything she could want. She puts forward the kind of meaningless platitudes that are the universal fare in virtually all high schools in America, and she does it with a smugness in knowing that she gave just the right answer to the question. Tammy, a wholesome farm girl, shows the camera all her patches on her letter jacket. She is most proud of the one for the Lutheran Young Ladies Gun Club, where she beat out Becky Leeman to become its president. Tammy explains that the pageant is really about being a winner. Then, as she is seen from a distance driving her father's combine, it explodes, and the scene cuts to Tammy's funeral. Gladys cries and remarks what a terrible thing this is for the pageant, then goes on about ordering the balloons. This is the first indication that foul play is afoot.

It becomes clear that Amber and Becky are the two who will vie for the title. When a boy—who spurns Becky's attentions to ask out Amber—winds up in the funeral home's makeup room with a bullet between his eyes, Amber begins to worry that her life is in danger. Subsequently her mother's trailer explodes, sending her mother to the hospital. Amber makes her mind up to quit the pageant, but her mother prevails upon her not to.

One of the most acerbically funny scenes in the film is during Becky's talent performance. She sings an off-key and breathy rendition of "Close to You" and proceeds to dance around the stage with a dummy on a crucifix complete with cheap dime store wig and beard. The audience is dumb-struck. This is the winning formula: Kill off your competition, then dance with Jesus!

Drop Dead Gorgeous is created by a young production

team which is fairly new to Hollywood. This is the first film for director Michael Patrick Jann after doing work for MTV and commercials for ESPN. Producers Gavine Pollone and Judy Hoffman have produced only one other film and a recent HBO movie. Lona Williams, the writer and executive producer, has written only for television. Perhaps it is due to their youth, and that they aren't jaded in the ways of Hollywood, that they have been able to produce a fresh piece like *Drop Dead Gorgeous*.

Williams, who had firsthand experience as a teenager with beauty pageants, has described some of her reasons for writing the film: "Part of what makes pageants so crazy is that they evoke all these grown-up emotions from kids. The odd perversity of it was something that appealed to me. So I took the insanity that already exists and pushed it to another level." A critical viewer can see the point. "Kill the competition," "Take no prisoners"—that's the way the system works. That other level is the reality of American society.

My impression is that the film is more successful than the makers intended (at least consciously intended) it to be. The hypocrisy of life "in the heartland" is elaborated quite eloquently. Greed, selfishness and violence lie just below the thin veneer of surface appearances. The pageant is not about beauty, but about winning, and winning by any means necessary. The hypocrisy of patriotism and religion has its inevitable and deserved place in the midst of this unhealthy environment.

Viewing the film in the aftermath of yet another outbreak of individual violence such as the recent Atlanta shooting casts a perhaps unintended grimness over the film. One feels a little uneasy about laughing at the brutality on the screen. However, the use of humor in this case is a compassionate vehicle to examine an ugly phenomenon.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact