

NORTH COUNTRY (2005) __9/10

Upper US mining country morality play

Directed by Niki Caro

| | |
|------------------------|-------------|
| Charlize Theron | Josey Aimes |
| Frances McDormand | Glory |
| Sean Bean | Kyle |
| Woody Harrelson | Bill White |
| Richard Jenkins | Hank Aimes |
| Sissy Spacek | Alice Aimes |
| Michelle Monaghan | Sherry |

If you've ever been tempted to dismiss remedies for sexual harassment as just one more instance of unnecessary government intrusion, you need to see this flick. It's based on the story of, Lois Jenson, who worked in the Eveleth Taconite Company in Eveleth, Minnesota, from 1975 to 1992.

In 1984 she began legal actions to protest the abusive treatment and stalking she and other women employees were continually subjected to by men at the plant. In 1991 her actions culminated in a class action suit against the company, the first sexual harassment liability suit in American history.

After the original verdict that the company owed damages, a special judge was appointed to oversee a trial to determine these damages. In 1995, he awarded the 15 women plaintiffs an average of \$10,000 each, which was appealed, then reversed by a higher court, which ordered a new jury trial.

On December 30, 1998, on the eve of the trial, nearly 15 years after Lois had started her legal remedial actions and 24 years after her initial employment, the women settled with Eveleth Mines for a total of \$3.5 million. One of the women had died in 1994.

Talk about justice delayed!

So this is a case, to my mind, of the truth being as compelling as movie fiction. A 2002 book, *Class Action* by Clara Bingham, documented the landmark Lois Jenson case. Michael Seitzman writes the marvelous screenplay and story of the character Josey Aimes (Theron).

What we need to keep in mind is that the movie is fiction. So as a viewer you have to decide whether real conditions were as horrendous for the women, particularly Josey, as what are portrayed. I feel this movie is as important for men to watch as women.

Too many men in the plant function with a herd mentality when it comes to women, especially single women. Not enough men stand up to protect women from obscene behavior of the herd. Finally, "The Corporation" acts as the ultimate patriarchal roadblock to changing things.

We can all see how the worst of men, and the worst in men, are encouraged by patriarchal systems—by the way, patriarchy is central to the Abrahamic religions—with their associated misogyny (hatred of women).

North Country does have a fair number of good men, especially Kyle (Sean Bean) and Bill White (Woody Harrelson), who works as Josey's legal advocate. They're excellent in their roles, as are Theron and Frances McDormand. As someone familiar with northern Michigan timber and mining culture, I can attest these actors nail the reality of persons who live and work there.

The movie is truly inspiring. For women, for men, for anyone who knows what it takes to stand up for the truth against great odds.

As a final note, I want to suggest government bureaucracies are not a solution to sexual harassment: they often hit the wrong targets by encouraging filing of imagined offenses. Women who use the bureaucratic system to steal from a company because some man says something sexual disgrace the honest women who have been brutally aggrieved.

Lois Jenson shows us the solution, legally and morally. Harassment of the level she endured is aggression, in the vein of assault and battery. The common law can certainly develop a body of cases to show the new rules. And companies adopt them and the courts can be "man enough" to enforce them.