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‘City Hall’ Review: An Inspiring Display of Municipal Bonds.

Set in Boston, Frederick Wiseman’s documentary epic celebrates the ideals of civic governance and the realities of urban life.

There’s a puzzlement worth pondering in Frederick Wiseman’s “City Hall,” the latest in a remarkable string of 43 documentary features that began with his “Titicut Follies” in 1967. (This one is streaming as a Film Forum release in virtual cinema, and will soon share online revenues with other theaters around the country.)

Why would a serious filmmaker, and a lawyer by training, open a film focused on the workings of city government—the city in question being Boston—with a call-center operator taking a report of a stray dog walking on a roadway, and close his leisurely epic 275 minutes later with another operator intoning earnestly over the end credits: “I have down that you’re reporting there is something wrong with the hawk’s eyes, and that the hawk isn’t acting normal, and it is feeding on a pigeon on the street rather than flying away with its food, and there are a lot of people around the hawk, but the hawk didn’t seem to be able to fly away”? Is Mr. Wiseman, who can be sly on occasion, trying to tell us that the city is going to the dogs, or that it’s for the birds?

Not likely. His film, narration-free as always, constitutes a love letter to civic governance, and the notion of democracy, at a time when public discourse seethes with scorn for urban life. It is also a celebration, simultaneously clear-eyed and optimistic, of what Boston’s government, under its mayor, Martin J. Walsh, has been trying to achieve in a city that’s endured more than its share of racial turmoil in the recent past. There is slyness, for sure, but also sweetness, in using people’s concerns for animals as bookends for a documentary that tracks the city’s everyday life in minute and enthralling detail. (Completed before the pandemic, the film also serves as a bittersweet reminder of how vital urban life can be.)

You can imagine all those people standing over the troubled hawk. But you can watch the ubiquitous mayor and scores of officials and workers doing their jobs with visible diligence, while citizens all across the venerable city meet, schmooze, discuss, plan, argue, negotiate, marry, speechify (often eloquently), rejoice (for the Red Sox, of course), plead for relief from parking tickets and demand respect, as well as get it, from their chosen representatives.

“Respectful” is a word heard often in the film. It’s part of ritual exhortations from the mayor and his staff, the thing they know they all need to be in this angry moment of American history if they’re going to keep, or regain, their constituents’ trust. “Diversity” and “inclusiveness” come up a lot too, illustrated by elaborate efforts at outreach. The film renders no judgments on the city’s success, yet you can’t help but be bedazzled by the polyglot complexity of the place—a poor section of Dorchester that’s 42% Cape Verdean, a Chinese-American festival where a woman in a cheongsam plucks a pipa while she sings “Red River Valley.” And you marvel that the city holds together as well as it does from day to day. (Unlike local TV news, “City Hall” keeps any and all street violence off-screen. The conflicts here play out peacefully, if often fervently, in conference rooms and community centers.)

When my daughter was little, one of the books I loved reading with her was Richard Scarry’s “What

Do People Do All Day?” All those workers doing all that work in Busytown! “City Hall” conveys a similar sense of intense industriousness, even if the workers don’t have cute animal heads.

A clerk listens, really listens, to a first-time father, as he describes, at great and endearing length, how his car happened to be parked in front of a fire hydrant in the middle of the night. (Does she still make him pay the ticket? Watch the film to find out.) A youngish Black health department inspector understands that he’s also being pressed into service as a therapist for an elderly white resident with a rodent-infestation problem. In addition to the rat that’s taken up residence in a greasy stove, the poor man is beset by his own failing health, the sad state of his house, and his brother’s effort to evict him. “My spirit is broken,” he says, to which the health department guy replies quietly, with feeling, “I hear you.”

If I’ve given the impression that “City Hall” portrays Boston as a shining, happy city on Beacon Hill, that is hardly the case. No city has been exempt from the nation’s upheavals, even before the pandemic struck. But Mr. Wiseman’s film shows us, without telling us, that American cities continue to be laboratories for rebirth and innovation. The spirit of this one is embodied in its mayor, Marty Walsh. A Democrat and unabashed liberal, he’s also a cancer survivor, a recovering alcoholic, and a virtuoso storyteller with a gift, common to great pols of the past, for connecting to everyone who crosses his path. “If you see me on the street,” he says at one meeting, “grab me and tell me what the problem is.” That’s what people do, and it’s a pleasure to watch them do it.

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