No Dinosaurs in Heaven
written, produced, and directed by Greta Schiller
New York: Jezebel Productions, 2011. 53 minutes

reviewed by Brandon Haught

Award-winning director Greta Schiller’s newest documentary No Dinosaurs in Heaven addresses concerns about who is teaching students what in classrooms across America—a cultural conflict that has been flaring up off and on for decades. The film’s central question: What can be done about teachers who teach biology or other related life sciences and yet don’t accept the central tenet of the field, evolution?

Schiller explains early in the film that she had recently returned to school to earn a master’s degree in science education. While taking a graduate course in biology, she was shocked to discover that the adjunct professor did not accept evolution. This motivated Schiller to pick up the camera once again to film this documentary.

Schiller takes viewers through two sometimes intermingling storylines. In one, Schiller and her crew travel on a rafting trip through the Grand Canyon hosted by the National Center for Science Education (NCSE). This is an annual excursion that takes participants on a journey through geological time as the hosts present both the modern scientific and Christian fundamentalist creationist explanations for how this natural wonder was formed.

The other storyline featured Schiller’s former City College of New York biology professor, Femi Otulaja, and a few of Schiller’s classmates from that class. Through interviews Schiller gives viewers a sense of the classmates’ varying impressions of what had happened in the classroom. Otulaja was also given a good amount of screen time to explain his beliefs and approach to teaching biology and evolution.

Mixed in at key points of the film were short interviews with public school students and their teacher and parents while exploring the American Museum of Natural History, clips from an Answers in Genesis presentation featuring famous creationist Ken Ham, and a talk by NCSE’s executive director Eugenie C Scott at a National Science Teachers Association conference.

The Grand Canyon trip yielded spectacular images and interesting information about geology and creationist beliefs. However, the trip participants were much more important to Schiller’s film’s central question than the scenery. One-on-one interviews and candid group conversations were the meat of this storyline. Geologists, a high school biology teacher, a minister, and even an editor of Nature magazine all offered insights into the teaching of evolution.

Unfortunately, those pieces that were so important to the film were nearly lost under a flood—excuse the pun—of field lectures about creationist beliefs. The creationist expla-
nations and accompanying scientific geology information were certainly interesting, but at the same time they softened the film's focus too much. If their inclusion was meant to bolster Schiller's more general theme of scientific literacy, they failed. While there are people who use the creationist arguments presented here, the much more prominent anti-evolution activists nowadays go to great lengths to distance themselves from the nonsense of Biblical flood geology. All such proponents have to do is say they don't advocate for this creationist view in order to dismiss the entirety of the film as irrelevant.

The college professor storyline provided a fascinating look into how a teacher with strong religious convictions tried to reconcile them with a profession that can run counter to those beliefs. Oftentimes, it looked like Otulaja was uncomfortable in front of the camera. He tended to stumble through his explanations, but that in itself offered an insight into the inner workings of his mind. It appeared that he was trying to balance being true to himself with defending himself against accusations raised by his students while also wanting to look reasonable and fair. These conflicting objectives were clear in his mixing up of words and his look of confidence one moment and look of insecurity the next.

Schiller did a good job of including a variety of student voices in this storyline. Some clearly thought that Otulaja had done something wrong. Others gave him the benefit of the doubt and weren't quite sure what the fuss was all about.

The big flaw in this storyline, though, was Schiller's deep personal involvement. Her voiceover narrative gave the distinct impression that she had a vendetta against Otulaja. The film edged dangerously close to looking like a “hit piece” aimed right at her old professor. To avoid this, she could have taken a wider view of the situation by including mentions of cases similar to Otulaja’s. There are plenty of studies, statistics, newspaper headlines, and court cases related to this type of situation.

Unfortunately, there were additional distracting flaws. NCSE and Scott were the stars of the film, so to speak; however, at no time was it ever explained what NCSE does. As such, the film’s credibility might suffer a bit in the minds of any viewers who have never heard of the organization. But one area that nearly demolished the entire film was the use of a group of toy dinosaurs as stand-ins for students while a transcript of conversations from Otulaja’s classroom were reenacted. These segments were truly cringeworthy. Even worse, they reinforced the perception that Schiller was personally attacking Otulaja. The whole film, which was good overall, suddenly looked amateurish as a result.

The bottom line is that this film certainly explores important concepts concerning science, education, religion, and science literacy. It would be useful in sparking conversations about these subjects that could possibly even find an answer to Schiller’s main question. No Dinosaurs in Heaven is worth watching, but it would have benefited from another round of editing.

**About the Author**

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