

# National Documentary Traces the Life and Legacy of Joseph Pulitzer

Joseph Pulitzer had an incredible journey and made a major impact on America. So it is strange that his story, beyond the award bearing his name, is not better known. With just a few of his accomplishments, one might expect greater awareness of his importance: arriving in the U.S. as a penniless immigrant, serving in the Union Army during the Civil War, moving to St. Louis to learn English and developing his reporting skills at the German language "Westliche Post."

Elected to office as a state senator, Pulitzer founded the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch," then advanced "New Journalism" at "The World" in New York City. His success brought him great wealth and he lived among leading industrialists. The details of his story are complicated by a demanding personality: brilliant but eccentric, he was challenged by severely impaired vision and poor hearing. A high strung workaholic, his marriage to Kate S. Davis, a distant cousin of the president of the Confederacy, was often strained. These factors might obscure his many professional successes in terms of being easily conveyed. But in spite of many challenges for a storyteller, filmmaker Oren Rudavsky, has effectively answered the call.

To translate Pulitzer's story into film format, Rudavsky expertly incorporated theatrical devices, including historical reenactments by well-known film and television actors. They include Adam Driver as narrator, Rachel Brosnahan, as inveterate investigative reporter, Nellie Bly, Tim Blake Nelson as the publisher's nemesis, Teddy Roosevelt, and a heavily-accented German "voice-over" of Pulitzer, provided by a Hollywood leading man, Liev Schreiber. It then depicts a

reflective Pulitzer aboard his yacht, Liberty, off the coast of Bar Harbor, Maine, not far from one of his three estates. He used that residence and support staff to help navigate the daily news, while overseeing publication of "The World." The film employs contemporary examples near the beginning and end to relate Pulitzer's initiatives and what remains of those in media today. The account starts by acknowledging limited source material.

The film includes a visit to the last surviving run of "The World" and a gallant effort to bid on the collection so they might be retained in-tact. The film changes direction providing detailed assessments of Pulitzer's work by a number of contemporary experts. Sources explain his background, immigration to the U.S., his Civil War service, and how he made it to St. Louis with other German-speaking immigrants. He set-up shop at the revered Mercantile Library, which he used as a springboard to learn English, and also in finding mentor, Carl Schurz. As a reporter for German-language newspaper, "Westliche Post," he made the transition to politics. Under Schurz' tutelage, he became known as an outstanding, if ruthless reporter – having once shot a lobbyist. He purchased and merged publications he named "St. Louis Post-Dispatch." In the process we get background on qualities of excess that drove his demanding schedule.

Pulitzer advanced political ties and with enhancement of his many innovations he moved east. He battled William Randolph Hearst in New York and ramped-up editorial campaigns against corruption and malfeasance, simultaneously using deft strategies to build-up readership: organizing a drive to pay for the Statue of Liberty pedestal and endorsing the exploits of Nellie Bly. His innovations are discussed in some detail along with attention to some of the most sensational stories he published as a means of attracting potential immigrant readers whom he identified as: "a volcano of poor, angry people." The film effectively uses animation to convey

Pulitzer's unique mix of guile and genius through review of major headlines, line drawings and large photos from historic front pages, as well as editorial cartoons.

The latter part of the documentary focuses on the adversarial relationship he developed with President Theodore Roosevelt opposing American Colonialism at the Panama Canal. The film presents a strong message about Pulitzer's investment in the news business as an economic enterprise but also as an institution critical to democracy. The film provides documentation and historical perspective on "fake news," using artifacts from well-known collections including those of Duke, Columbia, the Library of Congress and Missouri Historical Society. It delivers special insights into Pulitzer's ideas about the nature of news from some of America's most respected journalism historians: James McGraw Morris, Dan Czitrom, Chris Daly and David Nasaw as well as immigration expert, Hasia Diner. Medical professionals offer insight into the society Pulitzer negotiated in trying to come to grips with his multiple health issues.

Providing the long view, also included is insight from important insiders with first-hand knowledge of how his legacy played-out including St. Louis art benefactor Emily Rauh Pulitzer, widow of Joseph Pulitzer, III, explaining the challenges the Pulitzer Family had to address in attempting to maintain local ownership of the "St. Louis Post-Dispatch." The film ends where it began, aboard Pulitzer's yacht. He died there in 1911 near Charleston Harbor. The conclusion highlights the changes taking place at the juncture of news and entertainment, with an emphasis on things that remain similar, if not the same.

Within that context, it is also worth noting, that in addition to this excellent film, Pulitzer's influence has also been recognized elsewhere recently – at both locales forming his base of operation on the East coast and the Midwest, both in St. Louis and Bar Harbor. The Mercantile Library of

Pulitzer's youth, now situated at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, which was used as an important resource for this film, has been recently hosting an impressive "Headlines of History" exhibit with a focus on Pulitzer's humble immigrant beginnings, complete with a display of Pulitzer Prizes and MU Journalism medals. At nearly the same time, the city fathers and mothers of Bar Harbor, Maine have moved forward with their intent to erect a plaque to commemorate the importance of that location to Pulitzer's East Coast activity since his journalism activity and influence extended especially there. But the City of Bar Harbor reportedly had some difficulty deciding how Pulitzer's impact and complicated life in that locale could be properly summarized on just a small plaque. These simultaneous efforts are somewhat symbolic of the challenge of capturing Joseph Pulitzer's long-lasting impact on American journalism; an accomplishment that this impressive and dynamic film makes in less than two hours.

"Pulitzer: Voice of the People" succeeds in telling an important story without ever being preachy or boring. It offers some insightful history lessons and very telling examples of journalism as it was once practiced – by way of contrast to today's media methods. It also provides insights into the relationship between what Pulitzer started in terms of the high standards he encouraged and also heavily funded, connecting them to the so-called "New Media" of today. This extends to coverage of relatively recent stories, such as what occurred in Ferguson, Missouri. Oren Rudavsky has produced a compelling, masterful and well-crafted documentary about the life and times of the Hungarian immigrant who changed America by inventing the standards, practices and underlying philosophy of public service serious journalism still employs today.

The Nine Network of Public Media will screen "Pulitzer: Voice of the People," at KETC-TV, Channel Nine, St. Louis, at the Public Media Commons, on Wednesday, April 3.

The documentary will air nationally over the PBS' "American Masters" series the following week, on April 12, 2019.