



FILM

# COUNTING TO ZERO

—Maverick Hollywood producer **LAWRENCE BENDER** keeps one eye on the movies and the other on the fate of the Earth. Lately he has been looking for ways to make nuclear weapons disappear.

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In 2003, when Al Gore was touring American university campuses with his global warming slideshow, Lawrence Bender was in the audience, and he walked away feeling he wanted to do something – but what? “I am not a scientist or a politician,” Bender recalls thinking. Sure, he had produced *Pulp Fiction*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Kill Bill 1* and *2* and other hugely successful Hollywood movies – but what did that matter in the face of the daunting reality of climate change? “I am just one of many billions of people on this planet, but [global warming is one of] the greatest issues facing us in our lifetime. My only thought was: What do I have to contribute towards tackling this?”

What he contributed was *An Inconvenient Truth*, the film version of Gore’s lecture, which Bender produced along with Laurie David and which went on to win Best Documentary at the 2006 Academy Awards. “This was when I first had an inkling I could use movies to make a difference,” he says.

Four years on Bender is sitting in his sunlit production suite in Los Angeles discussing a new game-changing documentary, *Countdown to Zero*, which screened earlier this year at the Sundance ▶



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and Cannes film festivals. Directed by Lucy Walker and supported by Richard Branson, Queen Noor of Jordan and former Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, *Countdown to Zero* tackles the catastrophic implications of a nuclear detonation. "It's not in a recent college graduate's genetic make-up to remember the fall of the Berlin wall," Bender says. "Now that the Cold War is over, everyone has forgotten about nuclear weapons. *Countdown to Zero* is essentially a wake-up call."

Activism comes naturally to Bender. "My parents, both teachers, took my two brothers and me to anti-Vietnam War protests in Washington. That kind of thing forms you as a person." He studied civil engineering while training as a ballet dancer and actor. By the mid-Nineties his movie-producing career had taken off and he no longer needed to borrow money to gas up his car – the time had come for his inner activist to reawaken. It happened at Camp David during a 1998 screening of *Good Will Hunting* for the First Couple. "At that point it was, 'nice to meet you, Mr President, nice to meet you Mrs Clinton' – it wasn't 'Bill' and 'Hilary'. This was the first time I had ever met a politician. I really felt these people were trying to make a positive difference in the world and I wanted to find a way to do the same thing."

Bender has had to strike a balance between his core career and his more altruistic activities. He founded 18seconds.org, the energy-efficiency campaign, he is a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and he founded the international grassroots organisation Global Zero, which pushes for zero nukes. But he bristles at the idea that these are merely sidelines. "Honestly, these are my personal things that make me feel fulfilled," he says.

At home he subscribes to a small-steps philosophy (roof-top solar panels, recycling, hybrid car ...). He tells me his four-year-old son suffers from asthma,

which Bender believes occurs more frequently now in children as a direct result of pollutants in the air.

"After *An Inconvenient Truth* I asked myself, 'What, with my limited bandwidth and spare time, is the most critical issue that would have the greatest impact on the world?'" The answer came from Bruce Blair and Matt Brown, respectively president and coordinator of the World Security Institute, who asked Bender if he'd be interested in making an *Inconvenient Truth* about nuclear weapons. "Just days before, I'd been walking through the cold streets of Oslo with Jeff Skoll and Al Gore, on the day he received the Nobel Peace Prize. We discussed the greatest threats facing the world today. Of course the nuclear issue came up." *Countdown to Zero* opens with President John F. Kennedy's 1961 speech before the United Nations General Assembly in which he declares: "Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, or miscalculation, or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us."

Featuring interviews with international experts and former world leaders such as Tony Blair, Pervez Musharraf, Mikhail Gorbachev and Jimmy Carter, *Countdown to Zero* explores three possible bad-or-worse scenarios. First: the possibility of an accidental detonation, with a teeth-rattling rundown of near misses. Next comes the risk that a terrorist group may acquire highly enriched uranium from the former Soviet Union. Last comes the possibility that one country attacks another, a relatively unlikely event unless conflicts in hotspots such as Kashmir or Burma were to suddenly escalate over, say, water shortages. *Countdown to Zero* argues that, however small the risk, it's only a matter of time before one of these scenarios happens.

Bender says he regularly asks himself, "What's the greatest amount of good I can do?" He holds out hope that before it's too late *Countdown to Zero* will have the rest of us asking ourselves the same question. ○

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countdowntozero