

## **Election-Week Docs Profile Anti-Globalist Cleric, Deliver Civics Lesson**

by Josh Goldfein



Trouble brewing: Rev. Billy in action

### **Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping**

Directed by Dietmar Post

#### **Third Party**

Directed by Michael Burns

October 31 through November 4, 2003 at Anthology Film Archives

**When** is a flash mob not annoying? When it's accompanying Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping to one of his guerrilla services. In the last six years, Bill Talen's pseudo-cleric has become a fixture on the anti-globalist circuit, firing up friendly audiences and unsuspecting shoppers with his jihad against McWorld, wage slavery, and the like. Director Dietmar Post gives you nothing more than you'd want: a simple you-are-there p.o.v. as Billy prepares for and then stages unauthorized sermons at leading temples of multinational exploitation, including Starbucks, the Disney Store, and NYU.

The choice of the third venue highlights the broad elasticity of Talen's critique; he relates his crusade to save Edgar Allan Poe's tenement apartment from a law school wrecking ball to Jane Jacobs's revolutionary battles with Robert Moses over the same real estate, but admits he only learned of the connection after he got involved in the issue. Still, the NYU scenes capture Talen at his best: He sneaks onto the roof of the doomed structure, incites passersby to resist, sings along with a band dressed in raven suits, and handles the inevitable arrival of the NYPD with modest aplomb, even after they arrest him. "How should I Chyron you?" a NY1 reporter asks in the midst of the chaos, and Billy seems befuddled; "performer-activist-teacher-playwright" doesn't fit across the bottom of a TV screen.

A snippet of a Reverend Billy sermon early in Michael Burns's *Third Party* provides one of the few real jolts in this understated civics lesson, which is mostly as dry as its subtitle, *Political Alternatives in the Age of Duopoly*. Burns, also a rookie, offers a procession of nattering nabobs from Chomsky to Zinn, representatives of the major minors (who knew Communist Party U.S.A. VP nominee Jarvis Tyner was so smart?), and the doomed campaign of a Green guy in Connecticut. There's a glimmer of a strategy debate between Frances Fox Piven and Danny Cantor of New York's own Working Families Party, which is on the verge of electing Letitia James to the New York City Council, but mostly there's just sucking of thumbs; it turns out our political system is characterized by cynicism and apathy. The only other frisson comes with the first appearance of human lightning rod Ralph Nader, whose role as spoiler is barely addressed. There's nothing like a little acid reflux of 2000 to whet your appetite for the 2004 election year.