

# The Atomic States of America

Sundance

(Documentary)

By [John Anderson](#)

A 9.14 Pictures presentation in association with H Prods. (International sales: Ro\*co Films Intl., Sausalito, Calif.) Produced by Sheena M. Joyce. Executive producers, Joan Hornig, George Hornig, Noah Musher, Anne Marie Macari, Jane Preiser, Linda Gelfond, Rory Riggs, Danny Sherman.

Directed by Don Argott, Sheena M. Joyce, based on the book:

"**Welcome to Shirley: A Memoir From an Atomic Town**" by Kelly McMasters.

With: Kelly McMasters, Karl Grossman, Neil Sheehan, Alec Baldwin, Helen Caldicott, Christy Todd Whitman.

Located at the intersection of U.S. nuclear amnesia and the 2011 meltdown of the Fukushima plant in Japan, "The Atomic States of America" takes a fairly objective approach to an emotionally volatile topic, offering an examination of nuclear power that could convince its supporters to think otherwise. Based on Kelly McMasters' memoir ("Welcome to Shirley: A Memoir From an Atomic Town"), the docu presents both sides of the issue but can't avoid the conclusion that, *when it comes to reactors, money trumps safety.*

Co-helmets Don Argott (who directed "**Rock School**" and "**The Art of the Steal**") and Sheena M. Joyce (who produced both those earlier docus) eschew the camp quality of such films as "**Atomic Cafe**," but much of what they uncover, as presented, is nonetheless patently absurd.

*The correlation between nuclear waste and cancer is consistently denied by those involved; the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has become an arm of the nuclear industry; facilities such as **Indian Point**, located a mere 34 miles north of New York City, lack adequate plans for the evacuation of their neighbors should something like Fukushima occur. Granted, a tsunami may not be very likely to roll up the Hudson River, but there are enough unpleasant facts to make auds very nervous, whether or not they live near a nuclear plant.*

Someone who did was McMasters, whose Long Island hometown was in unhappy proximity to the **Brookhaven National Labs**, around which skyrocketing cancer rates were written off as coincidence or an aberrant gene pool. *Actor Alec Baldwin, a lifelong Long Islander, calls the Brookhaven people liars (and worse), but in following McMasters' work, the film builds a convincing statistical case about cancer and nukes.*

As we learn from the film, which uses creative graphics to explain some of the issue's more complex aspects, nuclear power was the U.S. government's way of taking the same force it had used to incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki and turning it to good. *The antique PSAs, newsreels and archival footage are amusing, but they also speak to a public naivete about atomic power and the fledgling industry's willingness to tell people only what they needed to know, or less.*

A parade of experts testify both for and against nuclear power, and with few exceptions, most seem sincere about what they say. Inspectors at **Indian Point** seem genuinely convinced that their work is protecting those who live around the plant, and seem just as surprised when they come under siege by a segment of the population that would like the plants closed down.

For them, as for Argott and Joyce, timing is everything: *In 2010, the U.S. announced the construction of the first nuclear power plant in more than 32 years.* One year later, when the film was apparently under way, the earthquake struck the Fukushima plant in Japan and gave new life to the debate over the safety of nuclear power. It can't be called good fortune, but Argott and Joyce make the most of the convergence of events, and while theirs is unquestionably an advocacy film, it doesn't take any cheap shots. Their argument is reasoned and worth engaging.

Camera (color), Argott; editor, Demian Fenton; music, West Dylan Thordson; music supervisor, Susan Jacobs; sound, Bob Schachner; associate producer, Jane Presier. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 24, 2012. **Running time: 92 MIN.**

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