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Documentaries break ground

Exploring the ills of the inner and outer world with new means and fresh perspectives

Young Madiom's smile is a rare bright moment in 'A Cry for Madiom.'

By Vivienne Nilan - Kathimerini English Edition

The Ecofilms festival that ended on Sunday in Rhodes gathered a remarkable range of documentary styles and topics under its umbrella. Two directors whose films provided a sharp contrast in approach and subject matter are former Israeli television journalist Erez T Yanuv Barzilay and Helsinki-born Kai Nordberg.



Barzilay made "A Cry for Madiom" from footage he shot in southern Sudan in 1998. His 63-minute, non-narrated documentary showing starving civilians queuing for relief from international aid agencies is almost unwatchable, so stark are the images.

Nordberg explores the inner landscape in "A Child in Time," a record of a conversation with his father, where he insists on delving into the ties that bind and break.

Kathimerini English Edition asked both men what made them, and their films, tick.

Unabashed activist

Barzilay, who now lives in Vancouver, is an unabashed activist who passionately believes the media have a duty to raise public awareness of injustice. "I want to know why the mainstream media aren't reporting these events," he demands.

Though a veteran witness of horrors in places like Rwanda and Kosovo, Barzilay is haunted by what he saw on his two visits to southern Sudan in 1993 and 1998. "I had the material for years," he said. "I knew what I had and wanted to share it, but I didn't know how to do it. Then some films I saw at a human rights film festival legitimized my idea."

Getting funding wasn't easy but the Canada Council for the Arts helped him bring the film to Rhodes and take it on to Jerusalem, where his message about the ongoing suffering in Sudan will reach a wider audience.

In "A Cry for Madiom," named for a little boy whose brilliant smile is one of the film's rare bright moments, the camera simply observes the plight of the starving.

A Canadian nurse working with an NGO has the appalling task of deciding whether applicants are sufficiently malnourished to qualify for the supplemental feeding program that may save their lives.

Flies crawl over emaciated bodies; skeletal infants suck at empty breasts; the weakest succumb and are buried. That is all there is and it is almost unbearable. There is virtually no context — a few lines at beginning and end set the scene.

Why is there no narration? "I wanted it to be as pure as possible. It is not edited, not even the mistakes have been edited out. I worried about how much horror we could show, but I thought this would be the only way.

"The context is not relevant. What matters is that this suffering is caused by human beings and that it is

unacceptable, anywhere, at any time.”

Emotional landscape

Men who have little trouble saying what they think may hesitate when it comes to saying what they feel. Nordberg breaks fresh ground to mine male emotions in “A Child in Time.”

He engineered an emotional confrontation with his father over a period of three to four days and filmed the outcome.

The result is riveting. The body language of the two men is an extraordinary mirror image of what is — or isn't — going on between them as they examine the troubled ground of their relationship.

They make intimate confessions, clash over the interpretation of the shared past, and bravely reveal themselves. Not surprisingly, perhaps, it took the filmmaker three years to persuade his father to participate, and the project very nearly foundered at one stage when his father threatened to back out.

But with the help of his savvy assistant director, John Webster, “who looked after my father and had lunch with him every day, and helped me tighten up my concept,” the documentary came to life.

For all its real-life content, the film is artfully designed. A stark, grayish, empty setting matches the emotional temperature between the men. A brief intrusion by the cameraman reminds us that the conversation is staged.

Strictly edited, it has a linear time frame, but deliberately has “no clear story or ending. From the beginning I wanted to make the film from fragments,” said Nordberg.

Where did this unusual film come from? “The starting point was when my kids started to grow up and I realized I was behaving exactly like my father did. I found myself blaming them for small details; there was no objective reason to put them down. My reaction came from something else, not from the situation.”

Nordberg did what he has with other situations in his life. He made a film about it.

“Being a documentary filmmaker is not just a job — it's way of life, a way to live. I can't really differentiate everyday life from work.”

Nordberg is used to addressing his emotions: “What you feel is what you build your whole life on,” as he says. But his father resists exploring emotions, which he likens memorably to waste at the bottom of a lake — safe if left alone, toxic if stirred up.

The outcome is a fascinating film. The relationship, apparently, still needs work. But the filmmaker is philosophical: “Before shooting I had to accept that my dad is not going to change. All that's left is me. I have to take responsibility.”

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