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Documenting difference

ALEX SUDHEIM | DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA - Jul 23 2010 08:56

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One of the most formidable components of the Durban International Film Festival has always been its documentary selection. The 2010 edition of South Africa's longest-running film festival proves no exception. A total of 29 full-length documentaries are screened over the course of the event, with close to half of these having been produced in South Africa.

Mugabe and the White African, the tale of Zimbabwean mango farmer Michael Campbell's stygian battle against Mugabe, is a fine example of the fundamental principle of documentary making: place the audience in situations in which they would otherwise never find themselves to deliver the bump-and-grind of first-hand experience. In that sense the film is edge-of-the-seat stuff.

Through this work by Lucy Bailey and Andrew Thompson, one gets to understand what it feels like to be in the middle of a farm invasion. Wobbly hidden handheld footage, life-or-death confrontations, narrowly escaped death-squads -- this is the viscera of the documentary, the breathless blow-by-blow business you'll never see on CNN. All the polarising politics of Zimbabwe aside, the film is such an avid account that even when, in a speech, Mugabe bellows: "This Hitler, he only had one objective: justice for his people, sovereignty for his people. If this is Hitler, let me be a Hitler tenfold," you can't wait for the film to cut back to the chase.

Another documentary that combines propulsive narrative with rare footage is Larry Shore's *RFK in the Land of Apartheid: A Ripple of Hope*, which, despite its laborious title, sheds extraordinary light on a strangely underdocumented chapter of apartheid's struggle years: the 1966 visit by United States senator Robert Kennedy. Drawing comparisons between the US civil rights movement and South Africa's struggle for freedom, the film tells how a visit by one man energised the struggle in the middle of one of the most oppressive periods of apartheid. On arriving in South Africa, Kennedy embarked on a historic journey: he spent the kind of quality time with struggle heroes that complicated the communism-demonising rhetoric of the Cold War, which characterised the US's unwillingness to stand against apartheid. Filled with rare archival footage, RFK's historic, yet relatively unknown, speeches reignite a flame of hope for an undivided South Africa.

Putting rare archival footage to remarkable use is *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*, which is American filmmaker Connie Field's scrupulous investigation into the role played by sports boycotts in the anti-apartheid struggle. Featuring a youthful Dennis Brutus at his brilliant best, as well as clips of Sam Ramsamy, Peter Hain and other personalities, this meticulously researched documentary unpacks the process of the sports boycott. A dedicated and growing group of activists orchestrated South Africa's isolation from the international sports arena, culminating in the country's exclusion first from the Olympics and then from international rugby, which hurt most.

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Rare archival footage from American filmmaker Connie Field's *Have You Heard from Johannesburg?*

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