

What's up, doc?

The Full Frame Film Festival

By: GERALD PEARY 4/18/2006 4:53:07 PM

I'm here in Durham, chowing down North Carolina barbecue (hacked-up pig, tangy vinegar sauce) off a paper plate and washing it down with sweetened iced tea, in the company of several hundred stalwart American documentarians — among them Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker, and Albert Maysles — at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. What do I call this? Utopia! Transcendent eats, outstanding company.



“Are documentarians better than other people?” I ask my Newton-based filmmaker friend Steven Ascher, who’s at Full Frame along with his co-director wife, Jeanne Jordan. They’re showing the life-affirming *So Much So Fast*, which chronicles Stephen Heywood’s valiant battle to keep his juices going, and his brainy humor and agnostic philosophizing intact, as his body slips away through ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease. “I think documentarians are better,” Ascher replies. He’s thinking of the standing ovation from the non-fiction filmmakers for Mark Rabil, the diligent lawyer whose *The Trials of Darryl Hunt* got a North Carolina black inmate framed on a rape-and-murder rap out of a lifetime jail sentence; it won Full Frame’s Audience Award.

Documentarians are like that: socially conscious, anti-racist, empathic regarding regular people and their woes, and willing to toil years in the editing room to put forth an important story. Durham might be a blue town in a red state, but the Full Frame bunch are far bluer: imagine even a single George W. vote from this progressive crowd. I’d heard for several years that Full Frame is the best-programmed documentary festival in America, and it might just be. Over three days of viewing, I see only really good films. Every one of them. There are extended Q&As with filmmakers after the screenings, and there’s no rush to clear the house. There’s a fascinating sidebar of films produced post-Katrina, and Branford Marsalis offers an impromptu New Orleans jazz concert.

Among the films I like best: Anne Makepeace’s *Rain in a Dry Land*, which follows two Bantu families from ravaged Somalia who are relocated in America. Family one land in Springfield, Massachusetts, family two in Atlanta, and both experience what you expect of immigrants without money or education: poverty, alienation, depression, family feuds; but they also discover dogged resilience and slivers of hope. It’s a sharp, deeply felt humanist tale with one remarkable scene: the Atlanta family negotiating stairs for the first time ever, the brave mama leading her frightened flock down the wall-to-wall carpeted steps.

Kirby Dick’s *This Film Not Yet Rated* is a blistering attack on Hollywood’s MPAA Board,

which sees and hears no evil when there's rampant, repulsive violence but straps films with the audience-stopping NC-17 rating if there's lesbianism or too much orgasmic sex. Part tongue-in-cheek detective story, this important muckraking work gleefully exposes Jack Valenti and his entrenched studio cohort.

Rebecca Snedeker's *By Invitation Only* is a personal documentary in which the liberal filmmaker rubs against the upper-crust Mardi Gras traditions of her society family, realizing there's no place in the celebrations for her African-American boyfriend. It's a smart, tantalizing take on class and race that traces 100 years of parallel New Orleans history, white and black.

Patrick Creadon's *Wordplay* is lots of fun and has loads of heart, a grandly winning story of America's crossword-puzzle subculture, climaxing at the exciting national tourney to determine America's best solver. Sure to be a box-office hit, this guaranteed pleaser can be seen tonight (Thursday) at the Somerville Theatre and Saturday at the Brattle as part of the Independent Film Festival of Boston.

On the Web Full Frame Documentary Film Festival: <http://www.fullframefest.org/>