



Film Society of Lincoln Center

From "Rain in a Dry Land," about Somali Bantu families in America.

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

At Human Rights Film Fest, Horror and Occasional Hope

"Rain in a Dry Land," written and directed by Anne Makepeace, is a fascinating companion to "The Refugee All Stars" because it illustrates the cultural chasm between Africa and America. The movie follows the amazing journey of two Somali Bantu families from a refugee camp in Kenya to the United States under the sponsorship of two different relief organizations.

One settles in Atlanta, the other in Springfield, Mass. As they learn the basics of life in the industrialized

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West (they have to be taught to walk up and down stairs), individual personalities emerge. The particular strength of this film is its intimacy, its insistence on portraying immigrants, too often lumped together by documentaries as a huddled mass of suffering, as complicated, high-strung people negotiating the personal boundaries between their traditions and Western modernity.

In the Spanish documentary "Switch Off," the indigenous Pehuenche-Mapuche people of the Chilean Andes protest their displacement when a hydroelectric project built by the Spanish energy company Endesa floods their legally protected land in the Ralco Valley. This film shows a classic confrontation between the weak and strong in which the strong, the impersonal forces of globalization, will not be stopped.

Underlying this year's Human Rights Watch festival is the groundswell of opposition to the war in Iraq, examined directly from three different perspectives and indirectly in several other films. The unspoken parallels between Iraq and Vietnam and the antiwar movements then and now are illustrated by "The Camden 28," a poignant documentary recalling the all-but-forgotten trial of 28 Vietnam War opponents, mostly members of the Catholic Left, who were prosecuted for breaking into a draft board office in August 1971. Thirty-five years later, the participants, who were acquitted of any crime, proudly recall their accomplishment.

Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross's already famous docudrama, "The Road to Guantánamo"

(it opens in New York on June 23), dramatizes the ordeal of four Pakistani-British who, traveling to Pakistan via Afghanistan to attend a wedding, found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were rounded up as suspected terrorists, and three of the four were eventually shipped to Guantánamo Bay, where they were held for nearly two years without charges. (The whereabouts of the fourth is not known.)

If the graphic depiction of their stomach-turning experiences of abuse and humiliation makes no pretense to objectivity, the film remains a devastating indictment of where the relaxing of safeguards against the inhumane treatment of prisoners may have taken us.

James Longley's "Iraq in Fragments," which already won three awards at the Sundance Film Festival and was shown at the Tribeca Film Festival, observes ordinary Iraqi citizens in three regions: Baghdad, the Shiite south and the Kurdish north. Only the Kurds, grateful for being freed from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, speak kindly of the American presence. The cumulative portrait is of a country relentlessly pulled apart by ethnic and religious differences.

Finally, "Winter in Baghdad," a Spanish documentary filmed in the winter of 2004 and having its New York premiere, offers a ground-level view of ordinary Iraqis, including a group of resourceful teenagers, surviving however they can in the war-torn capital city. If the film is not overtly polemic, like almost every documentary that examines the ravages of war on the people living through it, its infinitely sad portrait of waste, destruction and suffering speaks for itself.