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Report from Sundance 2005: Religion in Independent Film

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Report from Sundance 2005: Religion in Independent Film

Abstract

This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2005.

We are delighted to bring you a report from the Sundance Film Festival again. The reason we produce this annual report is that the Sundance Film Festival is devoted to independent films; films that our readers are not likely to see in their local theaters or to hear about from friends and colleagues who have seen these movies in local theaters.

Sometimes Sundance movies do make it to a local theater - last year we reviewed three movies that made it to general distribution (*Saved*, *Redemption* and *Maria Full of Grace*). However, more often than not, the independent films of Sundance are movies that our readers are not likely to encounter, even though our readers might find them very interesting.

Our purpose, then, is to give exposure to independent films in which our readers might be very interested, but which our readers would not likely come across in the search for movies related to religion. The following is this year's report.

Between
(American Dramatic)



Between is a mystery thriller about a young woman, Nadine (Poppy Montgomery) who travels to Tijuana to search for her missing sister, Dianne. Shot on location in Tijuana, the city becomes another character in director David Ocaña's surrealistic drama. Recurring motifs, characters who know too much, or who claim to know nothing at all, and repeating events all should heighten tension. Instead, the dialogue seems leaden and all characters simply unreal. By the end of the movie, it comes as no surprise that "Between" refers to the liminal state between life and death. There is no Dianne, only Nadine, in a coma, still grappling with the death of her husband. While there are some remarkable shots of Tijuana in the movie, character devices, such as Nadine being a lawyer, so we will know that she is intelligent--an impression most of her actions and dialogue contradict--sink the film. At one point Nadine says "It all keeps repeating itself. I don't know how much longer I can take it!" Indeed.

—MD

Dhakiyarr vs the King

(World Documentary)



Dhakiyarr vs the King is a remarkable documentary and murder mystery from Australia's far north. In 1933, a police officer, Constable McColl, was killed upon Woodah Island in remote

Arnhem Land. He took captive several women, including the wife of Yolngu leader Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda. Seeing his wife in chains, and a stranger trespassing on his land, both grievous offences according to traditional Yolngu law, Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda threw a spear and killed McColl. Later imprisoned for this act, Dhakiyarr spent eight months in the gaol, sentenced to hang, before the High Court overturned the Supreme Court's sentence and released him. This event marked the first time that the High Court recognized an Aboriginal person's right to be treated fairly and equally before the law--neither of which had happened previously for Dhakiyarr, who had received no counsel in his language and no adequate representation at his original trial. After his triumphant release however, Dhakiyarr vanished.

Seventy years after Dhakiyarr's disappearance, the descendants of this greatly respected leader look directly into the camera and demand the truth, "Who

knows the real story? Who last saw him? We want to know where the old man Dhakiyarr is buried." This film documents the journey of Dhakiyarr's descendants as they seek to give him a proper memorial according to Yolngu custom. The loss of such a great leader was not only emotional. The honoring of Dhakiyarr and the return of his bones and spirit will give power and knowledge to the land, to the ocean and to his people.

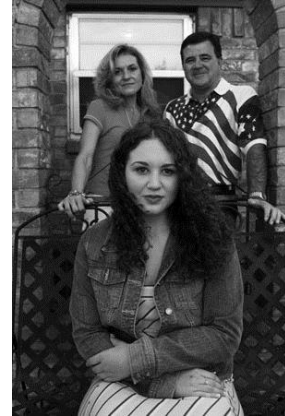
This documentary retraces the journey of Dhakiyarr and shows a remarkable reunion between the descendants of Dhakiyarr and McColl. Even as they confront the reality that they may never know where Dhakiyarr is buried, the Yolngu acknowledge the McColl's family's loss and literally, in a ceremony at the Darwin courthouse, break the spear that came between the two families, and cultures, so long ago. In their quest to honor Dhakiyarr and to understand what happened to him, the Yolngu, for the first time, allow many of their songs, dances and designs to be filmed. The erection of nine memorial poles in Dhakiyarr's honor is a transcendent moment for the tribe, for McColl's descendants, for court officials and for the viewer. *Dhakiyarr vs the King* is an impressive directorial debut from Tom Murray and Allan Collins.

—MD

The Education of Shelby Knox

(Documentary)

As *The Education of Shelby Knox* opens, we are told that Lubbock, Texas has a teen pregnancy and STD rate twice the national average, and we are driven through local drive-ins where teens readily assert that there is nothing to do in Lubbock except to get drunk and have sex. Shelby Knox was a student at Lubbock High School when this documentary was shot. She came from a conservative Republican family that attended a local Southern Baptist congregation with a charismatic youth pastor. Shelby's concern for students less fortunate than herself led to her participation on the Lubbock Youth Commission, an organization that spearheaded a sex education campaign for the public schools. Reaching out to the school board, Planned Parenthood, and a local gay student's group progressively broadened Shelby's sense of mission.



Opposition to the students' efforts, from the school board, the business community, and the Baptist churches, created a dramatic tension that forced Shelby to confront her sense of values, her trust in authority, and her faith. One of the powerful expressions of her struggle and her growth is represented by her conversations with the pastor who warns her against the dangers of "'tolerance.'" While he claims tolerance is an anti-Christian value exposing one to God's wrath,

she believes that God's love is central to the character of divinity. *The Education of Shelby Knox* is a powerful and moving film about a serious social issue and the complex ways in which religious authority, authorities, and values contribute to a local political struggle and the coming of age of a young woman.

— PAW

El Inmortal

(World Documentary)



El Inmortal refers to a Mack truck that rumbles ominously through the Nicaraguan countryside. Does it represent the country's struggle between the Contras and Sandinistas?

The uncertain power of evangelical Protestant Christianity? A family and nation's labored struggle to move forward?

All of these themes are present in Mercedes Moncada Rodriguez's documentary. The film features the Rivera family, who live in a Nicaraguan mountain village. On April 3, 1983 at 7:00 a.m., the Contras appeared in the village and kidnapped three members of the Rivera family: a daughter Reina (age 15), and two boys Emilio and José; Antonio (age 12). In the chaos and fighting, mother Julia

grabbed Juan Antonio, José Antonio's twin brother, preventing him from being captured by the Contras. Reina, Emilio and José, unable to escape, were then trained as fighters by the Contras and later engaged in battles against Sandinistas. Juan, in turn, joined the Sandinista fighters. The siblings speak of shooting at the "enemy," or turning over dead bodies after fighting, while saying the prayer "please God, don't let it be my brother." Although Emilio was eventually killed in action, the rest of the family managed to survive.

Now 34, the twins Juan and José live in the village and try to come to terms with what has happened to them and to their country. It seems a painful yet joyful truce, strengthened in bars and shared family celebrations. Other members of the family find comfort in faith. One daughter, Maria, embraces evangelical Protestant Christianity and claims to have healed people. Only at the end of the film does Maria's mother reveal that Maria embraced this form of faith after Maria's husband was tortured and killed for being a Sandinista sympathizer. The portrayal of Maria's involvement in the church is almost as ominous as the stories of the war. Indeed, as another member of the family, a 15 year old girl, is sent away to the U.S. to live with evangelical adoptive parents, we see another instance of the family torn apart by circumstances.

Everything in this film shows the consequences of war and the influence of religion. There are desperate prayers in mountain battlefields, Maria's intimidating

faith, simplistic "give and get blessed" pronouncements of a traveling preacher. Rodriguez and her cinematographer Javier Morón Tejero also capture spectacular visions of the jungle as cathedral, of forests that are graveyards, of spider webs as intricate as stained glass windows, and of cock-fighting juxtaposed with huge statues of Christ.

Mercedes Moncada Rodriguez's documentary is as large as life in this Nicaraguan village and her film captures the mythic power in the lives of the Riveras. The final scene of the movie shows "El Inmortal" truck wrecked and covered in ivy, as Maria walks unwaveringly toward the camera.

—MD

The 5th World

(Special Screenings)

The 5th World is a modern love story but it has a twist. The movie is about the difficulties that minority groups have in dating their own, maintaining their identity in light of a



majority culture that imposes different standards for a relationship than the traditional model. It is a story of Andrei (Sheldon Silentwalker) and Aria

(Livandrea Knoki) who decide to hitchhike to New Mexico to visit Aria's mother. His aunt and uncle represent the ideal traditional Navaho couple. They followed all the customs, they were respectful of their tradition and they were rewarded with wonderful kids and a strong loving relationship between themselves.

The two young people listen to their elders recount their meeting. The director creates a vivid contrast between the two relationships. The young couple teases each other mercilessly, uses "dirty bitch" and "fucker" as terms of endearment while the elders show admiration, consideration and romanticism with one another.

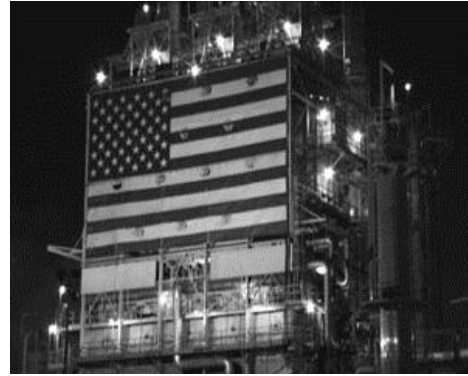
Although the cinematography and the music certainly need much work, and there are parts of the movie that are quite slow and weaken the plot, the storyline is interesting and adds an interesting perspective on a love story. The young couple's talks show how important it is to have a common cultural background and awareness. The two are able to share their experiences as Native Americans to bond and develop their love.

— GM

Frozen Angels

(American Documentary)

This is a documentary on reproductive technology and the desires driving it. The title of the film refers to the half million frozen embryos currently stored in the U.S. Directors Eric Black and Frauke Sandig interview some of the players in Los



Angeles, the world capital of reproductive technology. Egg donors, surrogate mothers, prospective parents and a young adult of Nobel Prize laureate sperm "parentage," all offer their views. Chief among them though is Bill Handel, a talk radio host and owner of the world's largest agency for recruiting surrogate mothers. The most interesting parts of this movie examine the preferences and choices the wealthy--and it is primarily the wealthy who can afford these procedures--make when choosing a surrogate mother, or egg or sperm donor. The majority choose the white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, possible child.

Unfortunately, the documentary rarely does more than graze the surface of these issues. The voices from those who are not advantaged and/or white are scarcely heard. Instead, there are too many images of Los Angeles at night, police helicopters and industrial parks. As this documentary begins to show us, the future

can be frightening and the choices we make now regarding reproductive technology are significant. Religious, racial and philosophical analyses of the relevant issues are left undeveloped though, in favor of what feels merely like a freak show set in Los Angeles.

—MD

Green Bush

(Special Screening)

Green Bush is a 27-minute short directed by Warwick Thornton. It was shown as part of the program that included *A Thousand Roads*. It is a story that pays homage to the rural indigenous disc jockeys whose role in the culture extends far beyond playing music. Even though *Green Bush* is a late night radio program, the locals come to the station for soup, hot tea, cigarettes, and a safe haven. In relation to religion, this is a story about one man's caring for his neighbors.

— WLB

Happy Endings

(Premieres)



Happy Endings is a comedy of errors in sexual and filial relationships, a comedic exploration of the consequences of sexual encounters/relationships draws on the talents of a compelling cast of actors (including Lisa Kudrow, Steve Coogan, Laura Dern, Tom Arnold, Maggie Gyllenhall) and director and writer Don Roos. Set in contemporary Los Angeles, the story follows several intersecting relationships, brother/sister, father/son, and various combinations of friends and lovers. Throughout the film, the audience hears a running analysis of the human condition - the pervasiveness of lies and secrets as a means of presenting/constructing a sense of personal identity. The themes of lies and secrets creating and destroying the bonds of human intimacy are explored in the relationships between two couples (one gay, the other lesbian), a struggling band of would-be musicians, a father and son both seduced by a beguiling Jude (Gyllenhall), and the deeply repressed relationship between Mamie (Kudrow) and her brother Charley (Coogan), the secrets they share and the ones they keep from each other.

The only explicit reference to 'religion' is a crucifix that Mamie left for the child she gave up for adoption as a teenager; however it resurfaces throughout the movie, representing the difficult feelings around the estrangement between mother and child. Although this film is not about religion in any significant way; it does revolve around fundamental moral issues, like sexual fidelity, blackmail, abortion, and truth-telling, albeit in a lighthearted way. While blackmailing Mamie and spying on the spouse of a subject, an aspiring director (Jesse Bradford) offers the ironic comment, "It's so hard to keep your ideals in this business." This comment captures the spirit of the film. In the end, *Happy Endings* is simply an engaging, comedic exploration of the complexity of human relationships.

— PAW

On a Clear Day

(World Dramatic)

This is one of those uplifting Scottish movies--picture *The Full Monty* swims the English Channel...swimming trunks intact.



On a Clear Day opens with images of two boys playing on a beach, and the words of W. B. Yeats "Dance there

upon the shore;/ What need have you to care/ For wind or water's roar?" As the waves roll in, a child's ship made of sand crumbles, and the gulls are gloriously free.

Director, Gaby Dellal casts Peter Mullan as Frank, a 55 year old Glasgow worker who is newly laid off from the shipyard and faced with unemployment for the first time in his life. A leader among his friends and co-workers, Frank is mute and stunted with his wife and grown son. The distance from his family can be measured in waves, it is due not only to his unemployment, but to the accidental drowning of another son many years ago. Frank copes with the stresses of family life and unemployment by swimming, and, when a friend makes a casual remark about swimming from Dover to France on a clear day, Frank decides to swim rather than sink. With the help of his friends, all well-drawn and fully realized characters, Frank trains to swim the English Channel.

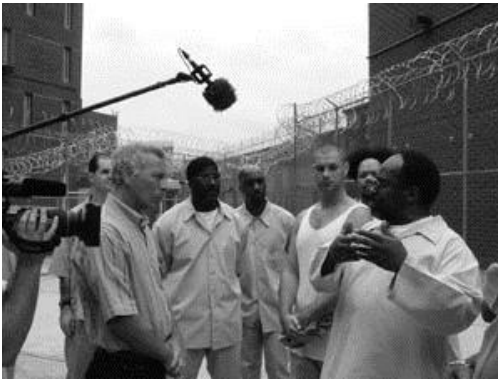
While I do not wish to give away the ending, this is far more than a sports movie. The ocean claimed Frank's son, along with the health of the shipping industry. Yet water is also remarkably beautiful, filmed full of air and colour. It holds the key to Frank's redemption, his acceptance of one son's death, and his reconnection with his wife and surviving son. Other characters, including Billy Boyd (Pippin, in *The Lord of the Rings*) find their own ways to surface and join

Frank in his moment of absolution, free at last from the past and the "monstrous crying of the wind."

—MD

The Protocols of Zion

(Special Screenings)



This film explores the various manifestations of Anti-Jewish sentiments and beliefs. Mark Levin, the director of *The Protocols of Zion*, uses the infamous *The Protocols of Zion* as a launching pad to understand Jew-hatred in America.

The text which is a forgery from the Nineteenth century proclaims that there is a Jewish plot to control the world by manipulating the media, the economy and the political systems and ideologies of the world. Conversing with various proponents of Anti-Semitism, the audience learns about Black, Arab, Christian and Aryan forms of Jew-hatred.

The film touches the major pieces of the contemporary anti-Semitism, such as the conspiracy that Israel caused the World Trade Center Bombing, Jews control

the foreign policy of the US and hence US went to war in Iraq, Jews controlling the media, holocaust denial, and Anti-Zionism.

— GM

Room
(Frontier)

There's something about *Room* that I can't really put my finger on. Maybe it's the political white noise in the background that director Kyle Henry says we all ignore everyday. Maybe it's the



plot: an overworked, underpaid, and exhausted wife and mother in Houston who sees dreams and then visions of a dreary factory-like room. Maybe it's the fact that this movie doesn't really have an ending, and feels too amateur, too art-house to me. I don't know. Either way, I feel like the guy next to me in the theatre made the right choice by falling asleep.

— AW

Schneeland

(aka *Snowland*)

(Premieres)



Snowland, which is based upon a novel *Hohaj* by Elisabeth Rynell, begins with Elizabeth (Maria Schrader) who is deeply and dependently in love with Ingmar (Martin Feifel), her husband. A writer, Elizabeth asks her husband's opinion of the chapter she just finished writing. Instead of responding, he makes love to her. The next morning, Ingmar leaves on a 38 hour trip. A phone call informs Elizabeth that her love has died. The death of Ingmar causes Elizabeth to leave her children with their aunt (Caroline Schreiber) and head into the snowy desert. This self-inflicted exile, as the movie progresses, allows her to deal with her grief and the loss of her love.

The story then shifts to introduce Aron (Thomas Kretschmann) a devout and penitent nomade who also imposed upon himself an exile so as to repent for the murder he committed while in Iceland. He travels all over the world with his faithful dog.

The most interesting and most difficult part of the movie centers around Ina (Julia Jentsch). When we are introduced to her, she is a teenager being flogged by her father and comforted by her dying mother. Once the mother dies, her father

(Ulrich Möhe) proclaims that she must serve two roles: the mother and the daughter.

Aron and Ina meet and develop a meaningful and purifying relationship. Their love liberates both characters- Aron is redeemed from his act of murder while Ina is cleansed from the repeated incestuous rapes by her father. Both speak of their defiled life prior to meeting and falling in love.

So one may ask what role does Elizabeth play? This is the weaker part of the movie, that is the connection between the two plots. Elizabeth, during her imposed exile, stumbles over the frozen corpse of Ina, now a grandmother. Elizabeth wishes to learn more about Ina's life and through her rummaging through Ina's belongings, she discovers portions of Ina's life. Elizabeth wishes to give a fitting burial to Ina and hence prepares a cross, and offers a prayer from Song of Songs (8:6-7).

Elizabeth's discovery of the love between Ina and Aron allows her to realize the redemptive nature of love and to bring an end to her self-inflicted exile. The loving relationship (which ends tragically) allows Elizabeth to understand her grief and loss. Since Ina lost her love to raise a child by herself, Elizabeth is able to return to her children and move forward.

The film's scenery forces not only the characters to be introspective and pensive but it does the same to the audience. The sparse landscape that seems to continue forever reminds us of our finitude and our infinitude. The landscape allows Ina to escape spiritually from her abusive environment while at the same time understand that she could not escape physically due to the harsh environment.

— GM

Shakespeare Behind Bars

(Documentary)



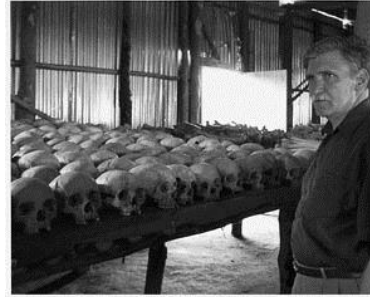
On a field outside the walls yet within the barbwire fence of the Luther Lockett Correctional Facility, a man rehearses lines from *The Tempest*; walking back to the prison, he comments on the meaning of the play, "It's almost likehow big can you dream," a hopeful beginning to a difficult journey. *Shakespeare behind Bars* follows a group of inmates over several months as they prepare to perform the play and explores the relationship between the characters they portray and the lives they lead.

— PAW

Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Gen. Roméo Dallaire

(World Documentary)

A cinematic portrayal of one man's confrontation with evil, this documentary follows Canadian General Roméo Dallaire back to Rwanda in 2004, ten years after he commanded a withering and besieged United Nations peace-keeping post



before, during, and after the genocide. The film provides a brief review of the Belgian colonial construction of ethnic identity, complete with a myth of origins (Tutsis as alien pastoralist invaders into a Hutu agrarian society) and identity cards with ethnic designations. This excursion into the recent past helps the viewer to grasp the origins of the ideological struggle in the early 1990s as President Habyarimane's Hutu dominated government was beginning to come to terms with a Tutsi rebel movement, led by Paul Kagame (now the President of Rwanda).

The UN peacekeepers led by Gen. Dallaire were sent to help facilitate a peace agreement; but, after the death of President Habyarimane on 6 April 1994, they found themselves in the midst of a cascade of events from the arrest of moderate Hutu politicians and Tutsi civilians on the part of the government soldiers and a carefully planned genocide, staged and orchestrated by hard-line Hutu politicians and the Interahamwe, a para-military movement. While the latter

systematically hunted down and butchered over 800,000 men, women, and children, the government soldiers and the rest of the world looked on. Many of the genocidaires were themselves confronted with the awful choice of killing or being killed. Forbidden to intervene by the UN and abandoned by the Belgian troops under his command on 19 April 1994, Gen. Dallaire was forced into the defensive role of protecting thousands of refugees and his own command post against attacks by the Interahamwe. Upon his decennial return to Rwanda on 2 April 2004, the plague of memories (e.g., the sounds of dogs feeding on corpses and the smell of death) prompted Dallaire to remark, "It seemed like going back into hell."

The film does not try to reproduce a chronology of events in 1994, rather it concentrates on Dallaire's own experience of and encounter with genocide, its perpetrators and its victims.

It is also about Dallaire's difficult command decisions, excruciating moral choices, and painful reflections on what happened and what might have happened. The deaths of ten Belgian soldiers early in the crisis led to a blistering post-crisis attack on Dallaire who (with the knowledge that 800,000 Rwandans died) is prompted to ask, "Are all humans human, or are some more human than others?" This story is replete with complex moral choices and decisions that can be analyzed for international policy implications; however at heart Peter Raymont presents a story about a courageous military leader who refused to pullout of Kigali when the

UN voted on 21 April 1994 (Resolution #488) to withdraw from Rwanda. According to Dallaire who had seen the genocide coming and whose warnings had been ignored, he stayed because "morally that [withdrawal] was totally unacceptable." With the limited resources at his disposal, he protected as many people as he could, until his stamina failed. After resigning his command in the late summer 1994, the personal consequences of his experience included bouts with alcohol and suicidal thoughts. The highest ranking military official to speak openly about his own post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Dallaire appears as a wounded hero, a term given by others and declined by him.

The chilling experience of meeting the Interahamwe leaders gave rise to the title of both the book and the movie, providing one of the most compelling religious dimensions of this documentary. In the face of what Dallaire took to be "the devil" and in the face of the gruesome face of genocide in Rwanda in 1994, he was also confronted with an experience late one night during the killing. Through his office window, he felt a breeze which he still interprets as a 'being of pure goodness,' if you will, God. In that moment, he had the courage to continue his work, both trying to make peace and trying to minimize harm. Despite the hopeful message about goodness and courage in the face of evil, *Shake Hands With the Devil* is a deeply troubling film, presenting an indictment of human nature and its capacity for evil,

as well as the failure among ostensibly good people throughout the world to do anything in the face of human rights atrocities.

— PAW

Stranger

(World Dramatic)

This powerful film tells the story of Eva, played by Malgosia Bela, a young woman who gets pregnant. Her pessimistic or even melancholic perspective on life drives her to abort the unwanted child. On the way to the doctor, Eva is robbed by Michal (Marcin Brzozowski), an addict and a drug dealer. Unable to pay for the procedure, Eva is devastated and as she is walked out of the doctor's examination room, another couple enters for an ultrasound. Overhearing the conversation between the doctor and the couple, Eva learns that the fetus is able to hear the outside world. This piece of information changes Eva's perspective and outlook on life.



Stranger's story explores a fundamental and important religious question: what is the meaning of life? Through her developing relationship with Michal, conversations with her parents (Marek Walczewski as her father, Teresa Budzisz-

Krzyzanwoska as her mother) and her close friend, Ivona (Barbara Kurzaj), Eva concludes that it takes more courage to live than to commit suicide. Moreover, love (romantic and parental) can bring sufficient meaning to one's life so as to make it worth living. Her father teaches her that death does not exist- human beings should not be afraid of the next stage of their existence. Death according to Eva's ailing father is a "leap to everlasting love."

Her pregnancy forces Eva to begin teaching the fetus about the world and about the meaning of human existence. Eva as an expectant mother is able to redeem others in her surroundings (Michal and Ivona). To some extent, she is able to perform miracles and repair that which is broken.

At the birth, the pain and difficulty of the labor cause the pendulum to swing back to its pessimistic side. Eva exclaims that life is sad. Yet with all swings of the pendulum, we never reach the same starting point and Eva admits that life is worth living when there is love- a love for her child.

— GM

A Thousand Roads

(Special Screenings)

A Thousand Roads was made for the National Museum of the American Indian and as such it sets out to show the variety of



Native American cultures that exist within the Americas. It selects to highlight several stories of Native Americans negotiating a path for themselves. It featured Inuit, Navaho, Cherokee, and Inca as an introductory profile of to the Native American culture and religion.

— GM

Trudell

(American Documentary)



Trudell is the story of Native activist, poet, and musician, John Trudell, now a legend among Native Americans. The story itself is simple, but how it's told gives the film an unusual power.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, John Trudell served two tours of duty in Viet Nam before attending college. He dropped out of college to take up the cause of

Native Americans and in 1969 he joined the community group, Indians of All Tribes, a group that occupied Alcatraz Island for twenty one months. The occupation was in accordance with U.S. treaties and it was carried out in an effort to get the U.S. government to follow the law. After the government removed Indians of All Tribes from Alcatraz, contrary to U.S. treaties, John Trudell became a national spokesperson for the American Indian Movement (1973--1979).

In 1979, Trudell lost his pregnant wife, his two daughters, and his mother-in-law in a fire of suspicious origin at their home on a Nevada reservation. Trudell was devastated. He gave up political activism and for the next four years traveled America by car. During this period, John Trudell found his voice as a poet.

In 1983 Trudell began to put his words to music and since then he has made a number of albums, written poetry, and appeared in several major motion pictures. He presently is developing a Native Culture Center in Los Angeles with the help of Angelina Jolie through their newly formed organization, The All Tribes Foundation.

There are two things that give this movie its special power. First, the movie is about the person and not about politics. Some documentaries have a political point to make and they hit you over the head with that point. This movie presents the life of John Trudell and then, as a movie, steps out of the way. The second

element that makes the movie so powerful is the voice of John Trudell. Trudell's voice is generally soft spoken, reasonable, and poetic and this makes his political point much more effective than a loud, ideological, and accusatory voice. Yes, there is a political point, and an important one, in the movie, but the point is made by the voice of John Trudell.

What makes this movie of interest to those also interested in religion is that the voice of John Trudell and his political point are wrapped up in the daily lives of Native Americans, daily lives that include an understanding of how Natives are to live and relate to the world around them, including the earth. The Native American religious perspective permeates the lives of Native Americans in a way that other religious perspectives do not. Religion and daily life, at least in the U.S., often seem to be separated and often in conflict with one another. In this movie we see not only a different religious perspective, but one that plays a significantly different role in the lives of those who hold that perspective.

— WLB

Twist of Faith

(American Documentary)

In the opening scenes of *Twist of Faith*, Toledo firefighter Tony Comes speaks to an elementary school class about monsters. He wants them to know that if a firefighter,



wearing a gas mask, hat and gear, comes into their bedrooms at night, that firefighter is not a monster. As Kirby Dick's documentary reveals however, monsters are not the only creatures creating horror.

Tony Comes was abused by a Catholic priest when he was a teenager. As sexual abuse by Catholic priests in Boston hit the headlines, Tony and his wife realized that Tony's alleged abuser, Fr. Dennis Gray, his former religion teacher and counselor, lived five houses down the road from them. When Bishop Hoffman of Toledo then asked survivors of sexual abuse by priests to come forward and speak with him, Tony, a loyal Catholic, revealed the abuse to people outside his family for the first time. Although Bishop Hoffman denied to Tony and his family that there were any other allegations of abuse against Dennis Gray, four months later the bishop admitted that he had known for years of several other cases against the same priest.

Twist of Faith reveals the inner horrors of sexual abuse and the effect it has both on the survivors and their families. The documentary includes wrenching footage filmed directly by the participants themselves, including Tony telling his young daughter about the abuse that he suffered and warning her about the man who lives down the street. Throughout the film, the church's inadequate response to the charges of abuse further victimizes Tony and other survivors. In the end, footage of Dennis Gray's deposition shows him unrepentant. In response to the question of whether or not he admits that it would cause serious harm to put his penis into the mouth of a child, he replies "every person's different."

Rather than being a blanket condemnation though, the film also documents the struggle of Tony and his wife to hold on to their marriage, their faith and their church while their daughter prepares for her first communion. The documentary shows that the consequences of clergy abuse are physical, psychological and spiritual. As Tony says, "you look to religion when everything goes to shit. You turn to God. Now I got nowhere to turn."

Twist of Faith is a difficult film to watch, and there has been a lot of press about similar cases. This is a chance though to go beyond the headlines, and to understand the individuals and their experiences. Ultimately the film is a testimony to the strong faith and character of people such as Tony Comes who suffer

tremendously in their quest for reconciliation, healing and justice.

—MD

West Bank Story

(Shorts)



West Bank Story is a great short film that attempts to take a humorous look at the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict from the perspective of the *West Side Story*. It does touch upon all of the major components of the conflict (settlements, settlers, terrorists, the fence, stone-throwing) but it does it in a way that makes the audience laugh at the cultural differences of the two neighbors. The movie highlights what happens when the conflict persists and offers an interesting resolution of the conflict.

— GM