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A 'Sundance virgin' on her first few films

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jan. 22, 2013 NCR Today
Sundance Film Festival 2013

Editor's note: Sr. Rose Pacatte is at the Sundance Film Festival, which runs through Sunday. She will write about her experiences for NCR, *all of which will be able to be found here[1].*

This is my first year at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, and as I listen to people chatter in the lines, what I hear most often is, "I am a Sundance virgin." OK, that fits.

This Sundance trip came together after speaking with Dennis Coday, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, over breakfast at the Catholic Press Association's conference last summer. His response to my proposal was, "Let's go for it."

The reason I think Sundance is important to the faith community is because in the last 20 or so years, the festival has been promoting independent films (outside the Hollywood system) about humanity. These films often challenge prevailing beliefs and question the status quo in every dimension of society. They can be inspiring and they can irritate, and as Georgia O'Keeffe once said, "True art irritates."

By and large, this means that the films are art; that is, they tell a story that does not have box office receipts as the final goal. That many Sundance films have gone on to draw large audiences and win Oscars and other awards is gravy.

For now, here are reviews of the first films I have seen.

Who Is Dayani Cristal? [2]
UK documentary directed by Marc Silver, starring Gael Garcia Bernal
80 minutes, in English and Spanish with English subtitles

This documentary is a mystery that goes in two directions at once: north to the Arizona-Mexican border and south to Honduras. The story is framed with the Migrants Prayer, a copy of which was found in the pockets of an unidentified man found in the desert 20 minutes outside Tucson, Ariz., in August 2010. Border agents collect the body and take it to a facility for identification. Across the man's chest is a tattoo that reads "Dayani Cristal," which leads to a collaborative, painstaking, often prolonged and most often futile effort between the Mexican, Honduran and U.S. governments to identify bodies and return the remains to families.

Cross-cut with this story, the camera follows Mexican actor Gael García Bernal as he retraces the undocumented immigrant's journey from Honduras going north and stopping at shelters, including one run by a priest. There are interviews with the man's wife, parents, children and his brother, proving that he was a man with dreams and something to live for. He was not a nobody. Forensic anthropologists comment on the wall between the U.S. and Mexico, saying that yes, fewer people are attempting to enter the U.S. from Mexico, but 5,000 bodies have been recovered since 2000.

"These are invisible people before they get here, and invisible when they die," a staff member seeking to identify the bodies says. "What is the magic number when someone in Washington will say enough people are dying?"

The not-so-subtle theme of the film is that the wall should come down because as long as trade policies and the image of the American dream stay in place, people will continue to come, and they will continue to die. And we need immigrants to do manual labor that workers in the United States will not do.

Too many people are dying. As the brother of the victim says at the end, "Why spend money on something inanimate (like the border wall)? Why not spend money on the living?"

This is a heartbreaking and hopeful story told with grace.

God Loves Uganda [3]
Documentary directed by Roger Ross Williams
90 minutes, in English and Swahili with English subtitles

Odds are that if someone were to ask you what the most influential American evangelical church working in Africa today, IHOP -- the International House of Prayer based in Kansas City, Mo. -- would not come to mind. This troubling documentary looks at how this church and other conservative evangelical preachers targeted Uganda for its pro-abstinence sexual morality message since 1984, leading to the Anti-Homosexuality Bill's introduction into Parliament in 2009. Homosexual activity is already a crime in Uganda and other African countries (a remnant of British colonization), yet this bill added the death penalty to repeat offenders. (The bill has still not passed, and the death penalty was removed in December.)

The worry for the filmmaker and some of those who appear in the film is that in the conservative fundamentalist method of evangelism, death of homosexuals is better than gays coming into the country to convert children to an anti-Christian way of life.

It's very difficult to review a film like this because it opens so many lines of inquiry and focuses on one church organization and a few individuals to paint a broad picture. But I was most distracted by the lack of interviews with other faith traditions, so I caught up with the director as we were leaving the theater after the Q&A following the film. He said, "The Catholic church is in favor of this bill and is saying nothing against it." I researched this some and found this Dec. 4 article [4] in which *Time* magazine writer Tim Padgett says in 2009, at least one Ugandan bishop reiterated the Vatican's denunciation of "all grave violations of human rights against homosexual persons." But lately, the emphasis, despite the rampant misinformation about homosexuals and their black-and-white interpretation by the disciples of the IHOP message, few are speaking out. The emphasis seems to be on healthy family life through sexual abstinence rather than the consequence of people taking matters into their own hands in order to get to heaven.

The teaching the film takes issue with is consistent with what the church teaches about sexuality. The issue for me is that the church teaches respect for all persons no matter who they are, and the film says this message is not getting out, though it does not mention the Catholic church specifically.

At its heart, this film is pushing back hard against the way politically conservative evangelicals from the U.S. are exporting America's culture wars to Uganda.

Crystal Fairy & the Magic Cactus and 2012 [5]
Chilean feature directed by Sebastian Silva, starring Michael Cera, Gaby Hoffman and introducing Augustin Silva, Jose Miguel Silva and Juan Andres Silva

100 minutes, in English and Spanish

This is a comedy about two American crackheads, Pollo (Michael Cera) and Crystal Fairy (Gaby Hoffman), who meet in Chile in pursuit of meaning -- or rather, a high from boiling and refining a cactus that grows along the coast. He talks about phenomenology and is careful about what he eats, though he will sniff and smoke whatever. She is a New Age, zen flower child with a sad secret who preaches health food and drinks Coca Cola from the bottle when no one is looking. It seems like a continuation of the 1960s and patches together what's happening, like the end of the world in *2012*, in one long stream-of-consciousness. It had its funny moments obviously created by someone with experience and isn't bothered by youth experimenting in mind-altering ways to find themselves. This line illustrates what I'm talking about:

Crystal Fairy: "Pollo! You're not going to believe this, but I've been here before!"

Pollo: "Really? When?"

Crystal Fairy: "Exactly."

Emanuel and the Truth about Fishes [6]
Feature directed by Francesca Gregorini, starring Kaya Scodelario, Jessica Biel, Alfred Molina, Frances O'Connor
96 minutes

Emanuel (Kaya Scodelario) is about to turn 18. Her mother died giving birth to her, and she is haunted by this loss, especially when her father, Dennis (Alfred Molina), remarries, making Janice (Frances O'Connor) the stepmother. Linda (Jessica Biel), a woman who resembles Emanuel's deceased mother, moves in next door with her infant daughter and takes on Emanuel as a baby sitter.

Emanuel is sharp with her parents and seems to dislike Janice, who could never bear children, very much. The troubled teen is shocked to find that the baby, Chloe, is a doll Linda treats as human. Emanuel has a chance to just walk away, but when Linda says the baby is cold, she comes back, bringing clothing from the dresser.

The fishes refers to a dream Emanuel's mother had when she went into labor, and Emanuel makes her father tell her the story every year, to make sure he has remembered and told her everything about her mother.

"Emanuel and the Truth about Fishes" has provided Biel with the opportunity for a tour de force performance, and she never wavers. This is a story for mothers who have lost babies, children who have lost their mothers, and mothers who could never give birth. It is raw, human, brilliant, gentle and ultimately freeing.

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