

Doc Aims to Heal Wounds

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Documentary films can change the world. Just ask Al Gore, host of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Now Toronto filmmaker Sturla Gunnarsson wants to change Canada, in a subtle but significant way, with *Air India 182*.

Gunnarsson's brilliantly crafted film made its world premiere yesterday as the opening night gala of the Canadian program in Hot Docs. It repeat screens today at 1:30 p.m. in the Isabel Bader Theatre.

This film will haunt viewers and shake them from complacency as it recreates, examines and reinterprets what Gunnarsson is calling "the most deadly act of air terrorism in history before 9/11." Most of the 329 victims of the bombing, in June of 1985, were Canadian citizens. Yet a true understanding of this disaster eludes most Canadians, according to the filmmaker. His film is geared to change that -- in dramatic fashion.

Air India 182 is one of the hottest of the Hot Docs as the 15th annual edition of the festival gets underway. By the final curtain on April 27, Hot Docs will have screened 173 documentary films from 36 countries. No one has seen them all, including this critic. We offer highlights, but there are other gems to be discovered:

- *Air India 182*: Gunnarsson succeeds by meticulously piecing together available evidence, dramatizing the human element of families who lost loved ones, and interviewing everyone available. That includes retired CSIS and RCMP investigators. The results, seamlessly juxtaposed, transform this doc into a classic of its genre and an important page of Canadian history.

- *Triage*: Dr. James Orbinski's *Humanitarian Dilemma*: Patrick Reed gives a sublime, articulate voice to an Ontario doctor who has become transformed into a humanitarian activist by serving with Doctors Without Borders. In this astonishingly affecting film, we see Orbinski return to countries such as Somalia and Rwanda. We are riveted as he rails against the stupidity of geopolitics and wars that cause people to die of indifference, neglect and abuse. Critically, he shows how to reclaim true humanitarianism.

- *Tiger Spirit*: Unlike *Air India 182* or *Triage*, Min Sook Lee's film is a personal odyssey. She returns to Korea, the divided country of her parents, to examine their lost culture and the pain of the forced separation of families. As a metaphoric aside, she also follows a naturalist, Lim Sun Nam, as he tries to prove that tigers -- symbol of Korea's strength -- are not extinct there. This is a beautifully wrought film. Poetically, it is paired with a short, *A Day in Palestine*.

- The Rise and the Fall of the Grumpy Burger: Hyped as “one man's search for the half-truth”; Matt Gallagher's sly romp follows the fortunes of his filmmaking pal Marshall Sfalcin of Windsor. A doc like this one can bring a man to vivid life, but that doesn't mean it has to be serious.

- General Idea: Art, AIDS, and the Fin de Siecle: Deftly exploring the intersection of the Toronto modern art world and the AIDS virus, Annette Mangaard's film is a subtle yet profound film. She humanizes the three artists who collaborated in General Idea, two of whom died in 1994.

- Standard Operating Procedure: American filmmaker Errol Morris (The Thin Blue Line) is celebrated for his meticulously researched investigations. This work of genius deconstructs the infamous Abu Ghraib torture photos and demonstrates how we do not get “the complete picture” until there is true perspective. The film shows how such a sequence of events can take place. But it also demonstrates how the true villains, up the chain of command in the U.S. military and government, escaped justice.

- Garbage! The Revolution Starts At Home: With folksy humour, Andrew Nisker takes on a mission: Make Toronto residents more aware of their garbage output, where it goes and how we must change attitudes and habits. Nisker enlists his friends, the MacDonalDs, to store all their garbage -- except for compost heading into green bins -- for three months. Even the compost is weighed. The process allows the determined Nisker to personalize the issue.

- S&M: Short & Male: Other than Randy Newman, who sang ironically about Short People, few have studied the issue of heightism. But Howard Goldberg's compelling film finally does the touchy subject true justice. It presents both anecdotal and scientific information on how short males are marginalized.

- Focus On Jennifer Baichwal: The films of Baichwal and her husband Nicholas de Pencier are given the spotlight treatment. Included is their masterwork, Manufactured Landscapes, a fresh way to look at the post-industrialized world.