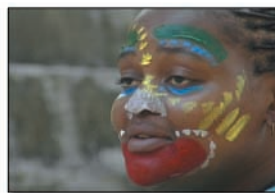


Faces and numbers

Condoms, fish & circus tricks: AIDS in Africa

A documentary film by Brenda and Robert Rooney
Rooney Productions, Lac-des-Loups, Que.; 2001.
VHS 53 min. \$75 (institutions); \$25 (individuals)
Available from info@rooneyproductions.com



Amidst the media flurry around SARS, it is easy to lose perspective. Though thousands are infected (and this number will certainly rise before it falls) the fatality rate of the disease remains at less than 10%. It is too early to tell how far the disease will spread, and how great the burden will be. The same is not true of another epidemic that defines the times: HIV/AIDS. Its toll is clear, it is high, and it is rising.

Numbers can numb our understanding: 30 million with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa; 3 million new infections there in 2002; 2.4 million deaths; 39% HIV prevalence in Botswana; 32% in Zimbabwe; 10 years until a vaccine. Zero cures.



It is nearly impossible to put this distant reality into a daily context unless you work in it. Visiting an AIDS village in Cambodia, home to a traditional healer famed for the success of his herbal HIV remedy, I was told that each of the 200 villagers had HIV (at least for now). Only as I walked through a village full of temporarily healthy young men and women and their lively children, did I understand the desperation that the people who have devoted their life to this immense problem must feel.

It seems a bold task to take this subject on, to try to get a hint of the reason

behind the devastating expansion of HIV/AIDS. However, this is what two Quebec filmmakers, Brenda and Robert Rooney, set out to do with their documentary *Condoms, Fish & Circus Tricks*. Filmed in Malawi, South Africa and Zambia, their one-hour film attempts to do what statistics cannot: to put a face on AIDS in Africa.

The film opens on a busy market full of smiling people, some talking on cell phones, others laughing. One might imagine a similar scene in any country in the world; aside from the number of black faces, it could be Kensington Market in Toronto. The narrator soon intervenes with the sobering difference: "1 in 4 of these people has HIV."

The viewer is then introduced to the touchstones of the picture, the purveyors of the circus tricks of the title: a group of young South Africans, survivors of violence, trained by Cirque de Soleil as performers in the African Dream Circus. Throughout the film, the Rooneys return to this lively group of young men and women, showing footage of them performing their circus tricks, and asking them questions about what it means to be a young African in the time of AIDS.

The African Dream Circus is not the focus of this ambitious documentary, however. The Rooneys travel through villages and cities, talking with AIDS victims, interviewing authorities who are trying to thwart the spread of HIV, and taking footage of groaning hospitals and of villages filled with orphans.

Through these loosely tied images and vignettes, the Rooneys attempt to provide the viewer with a glimpse of both the magnitude of the problem and its complex etiology. The African Dream

Circus performers hint at the distrust they have of a system that might offer testing, but no treatment. Why would they want to know if nothing can be done? The female director of an AIDS training program points to power dynamics between men and women that have accelerated the heterosexual transmission rate and threatened an African family structure that depends largely on the mother's healthy presence. But one of the most telling segments takes place in a rural fishing village, where we are introduced to Loveness Nkolola, a young African woman with a shy, broad smile. In a timid voice, she tells her story.

Narrator: Is this a good life?

Loveness: Yes, it is a good life.

Narrator: You were married here?

Loveness: Yes.

Narrator: How did you meet your husband?

Loveness: I came to buy fish.

But her husband is now dead. As a young, attractive woman, she was able to remarry. Her new husband says he is not worried about HIV. As the Rooneys move from the village, we witness the arrival of a large group of traders, men and women. We are asked to wonder how many infections will be traded with this commercial transaction in fish. By the time this film was finished, Loveness was dead.

Though the themes of this film are often difficult to sort out, the focus on the African Dream Circus and the many interviews with AIDS training program directors highlight what the Rooneys believe to be the solution to the crisis: education. Sexual education to prevent the spread of the disease, and basic education to strengthen the ability of young women to determine their destiny. We witness the street performance of two young men demonstrating how to use a condom to an even mix of amused, interested and offended faces. Gradually, young people in Africa are starting to talk about sex, and it is hoped that for growing numbers of young men and women, the message will reach them before the virus.

Several criticisms might be made of the cinematic merit of this documentary.

The viewer is asked to contend with a loosely connected series of narratives and is not always given much help in placing them into the larger context of this great puzzle. One gets the impression that the theses of the documentary were not clear to the filmmakers until the editing stage, and the lack of focus on such a complex topic leaves one with pieces too large to negotiate. Further, the political climate in South Africa, dominated by President Thabo Mbeki's reluctance to acknowledge several factors that contributed to the spread of HIV, is not touched on. Although we are shown the stark contrast of AIDS victims shivering for lack of antipyretics against the sterile world of a pharmaceutical trade show, a deeper discussion of access to essential drugs is omitted. Further, the cinematography is only of average quality and adds little to the gravity of the film, most of which is

carried with the conversations contained in it. However, to focus on the shortcomings of this effort would be a disservice. The biggest drawback to this film is also the most important reason why it should be essential viewing for Canadians: the problem of HIV/AIDS in Africa is too large to be contained on screen, or in 53 minutes.

Though this reviewer is unfamiliar with the breadth and depth of similar documentaries, and cannot judge the merits of this one using comparisons, the subject alone warrants the inclusion of this film in Canadian libraries and perhaps on Canadian television. (It was aired in Canada on Vision TV in December 2002.) As the cases of SARS dwindle, their stories will fall from the front page, to the second, to the last, then out of the daily lives of Canadians. Just like HIV/AIDS has. For millions,

though, HIV will be with them for the rest of their days. For them, the more documentaries like the overambitious *Condoms, Fish & Circus Tricks*, the more we will be reminded of the immensity of the problem and perhaps will be inspired to play a part greater than occasional witness.

During the making of the documentary, 10 million people were infected with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. Midway through the film, a man with AIDS is interviewed, and asked what he might say to God about HIV if given the opportunity:

I would [say] ... please ... this is a deadly disease ... most of your people are suffering.

James Maskalyk
Editorial Fellow
CMAJ

Lifeworks

An inside view

Peter Lojewski has worked for almost 30 years as an emergency-room orderly. He had often thought of studying drawing or painting, but shift work made attending classes difficult. In 1989, Lojewski spent his summer vacation in the northernmost part of British Columbia at the Atlin Art Centre, a school that meshes art with adventure and stresses working from one's own experience. He filled a large sketchbook with drawings, including some done from memory of his work in the Royal Columbian Hospital in New Westminster, BC. Three weeks of intense creative work allowed him to begin the process of expressing his ideas and observations.

A selection of Lojewski's paintings and a mixed-media construction were exhibited last fall in the group show, *Satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas*, held at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver Nov. 14, 2002, to Jan 5, 2003. An inordinately shy and gentle man, Lojewski portrays the hospital as a complex and often frightening world. He says it is

not his intention to alarm people, but to present hidden aspects of the hospital. Procedures, equipment, the relentless pressure to deal with a constant stream of people, tragedy and even hilarity all find their way into his visual world.

In 1995 Lojewski began to create

acrylic paintings from his sketches. In *Code Blue*, a doctor, a resident and several nurses stand around the bed of an older man. His belly is distended and his chest is sunken. Lojewski paints himself into the centre of the image, performing cardiopulmonary resuscita-



Peter Lojewski, 1996. *Modern Hospital* (detail). Styrofoam, aluminum, various materials, found objects. Acrylic 20" × 33" × 18".

Courtesy of the artist