

‘Movies that Matter’: A film festival to remember

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The ‘Movies that Matter’ film festival concluded in The Hague, Holland on 30 March 2011 after a full week of back-to-back film screenings, mixed with workshops and seminars focusing on filmmaking as well as human rights work. This is precisely what is unique about this particular festival—the human rights content of the films is just as important as the films themselves.

The festival is organized primarily by Amnesty International, in collaboration with several other partners, and has been staged annually for over a decade. This particular year coincided with the 50th anniversary of Amnesty International as an organization, which meant a particular critical focus on the history as well as future challenges of Amnesty. One documentary film called *Amnesty! When They are All Free*, which premiered at the festival, explored Amnesty’s achievements as well as failures since its origin as a “letter-writing organization” campaigning for political prisoners. The organization is now one of the biggest NGOs in the world and its focus has broadened to include a wide spectrum of human rights issues. The film featured released prisoners, critical voices, presidents, as well as employees of the organization through the last half century.

The main programme in the film festival was called *A Matter of Act*. Its 10 documentary films were devoted to portray human rights defenders and how they struggle for justice and human rights in all corners of the world, often at great risk to themselves and their families. All of the films were moving and inspiring to watch, but even better, most of the activists portrayed in the films were present at the festival to give first hand testaments of their work. After each screening, the activists and directors were available to answer questions from a moderator as well as from the audience. This added greatly to the experience of watching the films as participants could immediately ask questions they might have had while watching. It also helped in gaining a deeper understanding about the issues faced by the activists in their respective countries, as well as about the film making process.

One of the documentaries, *Budrus*, was a wonderful portrait about a Palestinian man and his village in the West Bank, who put up a 10-month non-violent struggle to save their land and olive trees from being destroyed by the Israelis cutting deep into West Bank territory to build their controversial separation wall. The struggle was ultimately successful, but only after the Israeli military had spent months abusing the villagers both verbally and physically with teargas, bullets and violence. The struggle achieved much international attention and inspired other villages to defend their land and livelihood in similar ways. Activists, including Israeli activists, journalists and politicians from all over the world travelled to the little village of Budrus to support the villagers in their struggle. Ayed Morrar, the Palestinian activist, as well as his daughter who mobilized all the women in the village to join the struggle, were there to give first hand accounts of the events. The jury of the ‘Matter of Act’ programme, which was chaired by veteran human rights campaigner Bianca Jagger, ultimately chose Mr Morrar to receive the Golden Butterfly Award for most inspiring human rights defender portrayed in film; a much deserved prize.

Ms Jagger and her fellow jury members also added a Special Jury Award in the same category for the three women portrayed in my film, *Unjust*. Suciwati, who was present at the festival, Angkhana Neelapaijit and Padma Perera were awarded for their brave struggle for justice after each of their husbands were murdered in the course of defending human rights. As Ms Jagger put it while announcing the award,



The three women in this film are widows, who seek truth and justice after their husbands were murdered. Their husbands were human rights activists murdered by secret agents without explanation and without justice. Driven by love and a desire for the truth, the three women continue their unwavering quest for justice. They have refused to be silenced, despite fierce opposition from police officials, judicial authorities and politicians. Their commitment to bring the murderers of their husbands to justice, sends a clear message to the world that we must assure accountability and seek an end to impunity.



Unjust was shown three times at the festival, each time followed by a Q&A, moderated by either a journalist or an Amnesty International staff member. Suciwati was there to answer questions about her victory in putting her husband's assassin behind bars, as well as the difficulties she faces in bringing the masterminds—members of Indonesia's military security agency—to justice. Many Indonesians living in Holland came to the screenings to watch the film and meet Suciwati, who is well known both at home and in Holland.

Other documentaries in the main programme, 'A Matter of Act', featured human rights defenders in Nicaragua fighting against domestic violence through radio broadcasts; a Senegalese female rap artist fighting against female genital mutilation in her home country; a lawyer in Cameroon defending gays and lesbians who experience violent discrimination; and a journalist in India who dedicates his time writing articles about the appalling lack of social justice in his country, particularly about the tens of thousands of Indian farmers who commit suicide because they simply can't see any other way out of their grinding poverty.

A wonderful feel-good film in this category, *A Small Act*, was the story about a Swedish teacher, Hilde Back, who sponsored a rural student in Kenya over three decades ago. Hilde never met the student and forgot all about it in the many years that followed, until she receives a phone call. The student, Chris Mburu, has gone on to become a Harvard graduate and prominent human rights advocate for the United Nations. Chris decides to find the stranger in Sweden who enabled him to escape poverty and gain a high level education.

Hilde, now a lively 88-year-old, was present at the festival and had everyone in stitches as she recounted how she thought someone was having a laugh with her when she got a phone call from a young man in Kenya. By then, Chris had already started

his own education fund in Hilde's name to help other children from his home village receive a good education.

Interestingly, *A Small Act*, along with eight more out of the 10 documentaries in the main programme, were made by female directors. In the festival as a whole, a full 50 percent of the directors were female—a major shift from festivals in the past and more mainstream festivals.

Another programme at the festival, *Camera Justitia* dealt with issues of international justice and the worldwide fight against impunity. The programme opened with *Prosecutor*, a fascinating documentary about the work of the first prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the passionate Argentinian prosecutor, was present at the festival to conduct a workshop and talk about the uphill battle faced by the ICC to bring war criminals to The Hague to face charges of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Seven films had been selected in this category, including *Granito* by Pamela Yates, which describes how the research Ms Yates did for a documentary in 1982 in Guatemala, could be used years later to indict army officers responsible for war crimes.

Other themes were also covered. For example, Movies That Matter screened a number of comedies using humour and satire to talk about human rights and injustice. European immigration and refugee issues were portrayed with five films, both documentaries and fictional films—always followed by lively discussions. Well known documentary filmmaker Kim Longinotto was featured in a retrospective of four of her best-known films. She has spent her career telling probing stories from all over the world about women fighting to break out of gender stereotyping—from women wanting a divorce in Iran, to a lawyer helping victims of domestic violence in Cameroon, to women fighting caste-based discrimination in India. Ms Longinotto has a unique ability to capture her characters' most intimate and profound moments, such as when a young girl in Kenya is trying to convince her mother to break tradition and spare her sister from the horrors of genital mutilation.

Many more remarkable films were shown during a week of Movies that Matter, too many to mention. It was a great privilege to participate in this festival and truly inspiring to mingle with so many great filmmakers and human rights defenders. I am determined to try to make another film to submit to this festival so that I can return to a future rendition of 'Movies That Matter'.