

## HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

**T**he Human Rights Watch International Film Festival was created in 1988 to advance public education on human rights issues and concerns using the unique mediums of film and video. Each year, the festival exhibits the finest films and videos with human rights themes in theaters throughout the United States and several other countries, a reflection of both the scope of the festival and its increasingly global appeal. The 2001 festival featured thirty-eight provocative films (twenty-one of which were premieres), from fifteen countries. The festival included feature-length fiction films, documentaries, and animation. In 2001, selected films from the festival showcased in twenty-eight cities throughout the U.S.

In selecting films for the festival, Human Rights Watch concentrates equally on artistic merit and human rights content. The festival encourages filmmakers around the world to address human rights subject matter in their work and presents films and videos from both new and established international filmmakers. Each year, the festival's programming committee screens more than five hundred films and videos to create a program that represents a range of countries and issues. Once a film is nominated for a place in the program, staff of the relevant divisions of Human Rights Watch also view the work to confirm its accuracy in the portrayal of human rights concerns. Though the festival rules out films that contain unacceptable inaccuracies of fact, we do not bar any films on the basis of a particular point of view.

The 2001 festival was presented over a two-week period in New York as a collaborative venture with the Film Society of Lincoln Center. The festival reached out to a broader audience by co-presenting selected films with four important New York festivals: the African Film Festival, Margaret Mead Film and Video Festival, New York Latino Film Festival, and the New Festival/New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, as well as several independent media organizations: the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers, DoubleTake, the Educational Video Center, MediaRights.org, Pixelpress.org, and POV/The American Documentary. A majority of the screenings were followed by discussions with the filmmakers, media activists and Human Rights Watch staff on the issues represented in each work.

The festival's presence on-line expanded greatly this year. In collaboration with MediaRights.org, a community web site created by media activists, we co-presented our first on line festival, "Media That Matters Online Film Festival." This series featured twelve short films and videos on U.S. (domestic) human rights issues for the entire month of June. Audiences from around the world were able to view these short works via the Internet and to then take immediate action by engaging in several campaigns made available on-line.

In association with Pixelpress.org, the film festival sponsored the multimedia presentation *Juvenile Justice*-a photograph and web site project which explores the lives of five adolescents and their struggle with the California criminal justice system. Award winning photographer Joseph Rodriguez drew on his own personal history as an incarcerated youth and contrasts this with the lives and stories of his

subjects in Northern California. Many of these youth are being judged in court as adults. *Juvenile Justice* has encouraged on-line dialogue about several current human concerns and issues and the power of art (as an agent for change), between teens, parents, teachers, human rights activist, and artists.

The 2001 opening night celebration presented the U.S. premiere of the re-release of Hector Babenco's, *Kiss of a Spider Woman*, the first independent film to win an Academy Award for Best Actor and to be honored with four top Academy nominations, including Best Picture. After a critically acclaimed, yet limited release in 1986, the film virtually disappeared and was not again available to audiences until June 2001. Babenco's groundbreaking film set in a Latin American metropolis in the mid-1970's, explores the unlikely relationship that develops between two prisoners: one political revolutionary, the other a flamboyant homosexual convicted and imprisoned on "morality" charges. The film's emotional drama remains as strong today as fifteen years ago.

As part of the opening night program, the festival annually awards a prize in the name of cinematographer and director Nestor Almendros, who was also a cherished friend of the festival and Human Rights Watch. The award, which includes a cash prize of U.S.\$5,000, goes to a deserving and courageous filmmaker in recognition of his or her contributions to human rights through film. The 2001 festival awarded the Nestor Almendros Prize to the three Italian filmmakers of the documentary *Jung(War): In the Land of the Mujaheddin*: Fabrizio Lazzaretti, Giuseppe Pettito, and Alberto Vendemmiati. These filmmakers demonstrated enormous courage filming in northern Afghanistan during war time, and their compassion for the people of Afghanistan is strikingly evident in this intimate, accomplished film.

Responding to the tragedy on September 11, the festival began to distribute *Jung (War): In the land of the Mujaheddin* on VHS format, free of charge, for community organization and festival screenings. To date the festival has responded to over one hundred requests with thirty screenings confirmed across the U.S. and Canada, including a theatrical run at the Cinema Village in New York City which began at the end of November.

In 1995, in honor of Irene Diamond, a longtime board member and supporter of Human Rights Watch, the festival launched the Irene Diamond Lifetime Achievement Award, presented annually to a director whose life's work demonstrates an outstanding commitment to human rights and film. Previous recipients have included Costa Gavras, Ousmane Sembene, Barbara Kopple, and Alan J. Pakula. This year, the award was presented to Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck. Peck's exceptional body of documentary and fiction films focuses on the human rights situation in Haiti over the past forty years. His newest work, *Lumumba*, a dramatic portrait of legendary African leader Patrice Lumumba (and the first prime minister of the Congo following its independence) premiered at this year's New York festival and continues to screen theatrically throughout the U.S. to sold out audiences.

Highlights of the 2001 festival included the world premiere of Stephanie Black's *Life and Debt*, an extraordinary documentary exploring the complexities and dangers of economic globalization for Jamaica and developing countries around the world. Musician Ziggy Marley gave a special musical introduction for our audiences before the film screenings. Other highlights included; *Promises*, a moving insight into the Middle East conflict as seen through the eyes of seven children, both

Palestinian and Israeli, growing up in Jerusalem today. The festival hosted its first day of all youth programming—media by and for youth—about human rights issues. *Trembling Before G-d*, Sandi Simcha Dubowski's landmark documentary film about Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who "come out" as gays and lesbians, closed this year's festival.

Each year the festival holds a series of special film screenings for high school students and their teachers in an effort to encourage dialogue about human rights in the classroom. Daytime screenings are followed by discussions among the students, their teachers, visiting filmmakers, and Human Rights Watch staff. In 2001, in conjunction with our newly launched San Francisco festival, we hosted a special screening for public high school students of the documentary, *Public Enemy*, which focuses on four key members of the Black Panthers. Bobby Seale, a protagonist in the film and a co-founder of the Black Panthers, spent two hours in lively, heated, and passionate post-screening discussion with the youth audience.

In 1996 the festival expanded to London. The 2001 London festival produced with the Ritzy Theater in Brixton showcased the United Kingdom's premiere of Julian Schnabel's magnificent and lush *Before Night Falls*. The film chronicles the life of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, one of the major artists to emerged from the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s. Running afoul of the Castro regime as both a political dissident and openly gay man, Arenas was harassed, imprisoned, and physically abused—all the more so because he managed to smuggle out and publish his works abroad. Schnabel captures Arenas's extraordinary life with remarkable honesty.

The London festival featured the timely screening of *Caravan of Death*, journalist Isabel Hilton's documentary on Judge Juan Guzman's attempts to put former Chilean military ruler General Augusto Pinochet on trial for crimes he committed twenty-seven years ago. The festival also featured a special United Kingdom premiere of *Bamboozled*, Spike Lee's latest film, a blistering satire of network television's pitfalls and prejudices.

In a further effort to expand the festival's scope, a selected package of traveling films from the festival was created in 1994. The Traveling Festival is presented annually in a growing number of sites and cities. As of November 2001, the showcase had been presented in Salt Lake City, Utah; Portland, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; Seattle, Washington; Chicago, Illinois; and Riverside, California. In an effort to expand its capacity to raise awareness about human rights issues in the United States and abroad, the film festival created a web site with numerous support materials and links to Human Rights Watch's work on a variety of topics. We have facilitated filmmaker appearances at a number of traveling festival sites, which further enhances the audience's ability to discuss the films screened and analyze the issues they raise. In addition, we produced full-scale film festivals in both Boston and the San Francisco Bay Area for the first time where we came together and discussed human rights issues in a community-based setting. These two festivals were unique in their geographical scope: the Boston festival was hosted at the Museum of Fine Arts in midtown, the Coolidge Corner theater in Brookline and the International Institute in downtown Boston. The Bay Area festival venues were equally broad: playing at The Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, the Yerba Buena Center in downtown San Francisco, and the Rafael Film Center in Rafael, California.