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A Feast of Documentaries

A dozen non-fiction films at the Tribeca Film Festival prove that truth is stranger than Hollywood fiction, and often more entertaining

By RICHARD CORLISS

Was *Fahrenheit 9/11* a fluke? Michael Moore's anti-Bush documentary earned \$119 million at the U.S. box office in 2004, and helped unseat a Presi... oh, sorry, George W. Bush still won. But it entertained, enlightened and annoyed many people, sometimes the same people, and hinted that the documentary form, so long ghettoized in art houses and on PBS, might be ready to flourish among mass audiences.

Well, with one exception so odd it can be dismissed (the \$79 million take for *March of the Penguins*), that didn't happen. Last summer's highly touted docs, from *Murderball* to *Rize*, *Grizzly Man* to *The Aristocrats*, raised hardly a murmur among mallrats and their families. You can count on the fingers of a maimed hand the docs that have grossed more than \$15 million. Nonfiction films — including the couple dozen that have been playing at this year's Tribeca Film Festival here in New York City (the documentary portion of which is being sponsored by TIME Magazine) — look destined to appeal to a small crowd, a niche crowd.

A liberal crowd, I hear you say. Or, as they have been called lately, the lonely crowd. Yes, most of these films, if they have a political slant, tilt left. Except for a few errant jabs at *Fahrenheit 9/11*, there are virtually no right-wing docs. If there's a sympathetic take on the Bush Administration's Iraq policy, or a study of Third World sweatshops (sorry, entrepreneurial empowerment sites) from the owner's viewpoint, I haven't seen it. That leaves the form open to cries from conservatives that docs are liberal soap operas, fables for the smug, gripes from the people out of power about those who wield it.

I wouldn't dispute that, even though I'm a knee-jerk liberal and proud of it. Indeed, I wouldn't mind seeing a few docs that challenge my political complacencies rather than appealing to them. Somebody might even make a film about a born-again preacher who isn't venal or nuts. But politics aside for just a moment, non-fiction films have a nobler mission than electing John Kerry, or reinforcing liberals' assurance that they dwell on the moral high ground. They remind us, Left or Right, that there's a world beyond the one we so cozily occupy — that people in remote countries, who seem so different if we give them a thought, have lessons to teach us. They put a human face on a social issue, to indicate why we should be invested in public policy — because, directly or indirectly, it affects you and me. At the heart of most documentaries is this salient message: The Other Is Us.

This week, after watching more than a dozen docs showing at the Tribeca Film Festival, I realized that many of them possess more entertainment value than the Hollywood films I review for a living. They contain more intelligence, more surprises, a better chance for making me laugh (at the wit and foibles of the protagonists) or mist and moist up. Some of these films will get to a theater near you, if you live near an art house, or onto public and cable TV stations. From the notes that follow, you decide which ones are worth tracking down...

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...Our tax dollars also support the industries that have outsourced American jobs. In Tijuana, which bills itself as "World Capital of the Television," companies like Sony, Sanyo and Panasonic opened factories whose employees assemble TV-set parts. In 1999, 4,000 factories employed a million workers. From all over Mexico and countries farther south, people (mostly women) streamed into the city for the relatively high wages: \$68 for a six-day week. The owner of one building leased to a manufacturer said that globalization was turning Mexico into "a nation of plantations." These are the Grapes of NAFTA.

Maquilapolis, by Vicky Funari and Sergio De La Torre, is in the spirit of recent documentaries on the plight of the female workers who staff garment factories in China. This film focuses on Carmen Duran, a Mexican employee of Sanyo. When, after 6-1/2 years in Tijuana, the company decamped for Indonesia, Duran and a few of her coworkers sued to win the severance pay the said was mandated by Mexican law. Another laborer, Lourdes Lujon, agitated against Metales y Derivados when that company skipped town and left a festering dump that gave those who lived nearby skin diseases and put them at risk for leukemia.

The movie, mostly a straightforward synopsis of the workers' grievances, argues not for special privileges but for a flicker of justice. It has one gust of cinematic artistry: scenes of the women, on a desolate mesa, performing hand-ballets of their factory tasks. It is reminiscent of Robert Flaherty's great document of Depression-era farm workers, *The Land* (1941), where we watch a sleeping boy whose hands move automatically and involuntarily. "He's shucking peas," his mother explains.

Do the workers win their cases? I won't say. But the conflicts of work and poverty, hope and exploitation, dignity and despair play out around the world, as people whose lives rarely touch ours toil to make our computers and sneakers.

A decade ago, a documentary similar to *Maquilapolis* could have been made in any Rust Belt city about the workers whose jobs literally went south, to be filled at much lower wages by people like Carmen and Lourdes. A decade from now, another might be made in Indonesia, if businesses can find poorer countries and hungrier workers.