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Modern African Adventure Told in Documentary, *White Hotel*

by Bruce Bellingham

When two San Francisco documentary filmmakers went to the east African nation of Eritrea to make a documentary about AIDS, they did their best to prepare themselves for the human drama that's being played out there on an epic scale. But they didn't count on having to face their own private terrors.

For Tobi Solvang, it was a lesson in trust. For Dianne Griffin, it was a journey to forgiveness.

Solvang and Griffin arrived in Eritrea just as the nation was celebrating the victory of its 30-year war for independence from Ethiopia. Griffin was already reeling from the news of the death of her father, killed in an accident in Kansas City the day before she left for Africa. Griffin decided not to postpone her trip and attend his funeral. "His drinking had ruined a lot of my childhood plans," Griffin says in the film. "I wasn't going to let him do it again."

She says she included the story of her father in the film because they didn't want to do a "typical documentary."

"We didn't want to do a 'God, look at those people' kind of film," Griffin says. "We all have our history." Griffin's father got sober a year before he died and she says she's had her own problems with alcohol. The issue of dealing with dad became quite intense during the African experience.

Solvang's own intense encounter was yet to come. Their home for three months became the White Hotel.

They plunged into their story. The AIDS crisis in Eritrea is unique in the sense that nearly all of those who contract AIDS in the half-Christian, half-Moslem nation of 3.4 million get it through heterosexual contact. Homosexuality is illegal and punishable by "being cut."

Pre-marital sex is forbidden but prostitution is practiced openly. One out of four prostitutes, or "bar girls," carries HIV. "Poverty has much to do with the spread of AIDS," says Griffin. "Few can afford a \$2 test. Also, AIDS is a long-term illness. There are so many other diseases there that are overwhelming — malaria, TB, malnutrition."

The ancient and barbaric practice of female circumcision is another reason for the spread of AIDS in Eritrea, according to the filmmakers. "There are three kinds of female circumcision," explains Griffin. "If a woman has been infibulated, a lot of times she'll have scar tissue and her husband will have to cut her open with a knife on the wedding night. She'll bleed and that increases the chance of AIDS transmission."

Women are often treated abominably by men in Africa. But Solvang and Griffin were puzzled why women were inflicting circumcision on other women. "It's hard to understand," says Solvang, "but in some cases, women feel this is the only way their daughters might have a chance of getting married. There aren't a lot of choices for women in Africa."

HIV is also often carried by truck drivers, who traverse the east African continent. "A

truck driver didn't tell his wife he had HIV," an obstetrician told the filmmakers. "They don't care. They think, 'If I have to die, then the woman should die, too.'"

They encountered curious ironies in Africa. As a child born to immigrants, Solvang was forced to speak Norwegian. She was stunned to learn thousands of Norwegians were in Eritrea, providing assistance throughout the war. Norwegian, believe it or not, is still spoken by some in Esmara, the capital city. "I spoke more Norwegian in Africa than I had for years at home," Solvang laughs.

In the film, we learn of Solvang's growing concern about Griffin and the deepening angst over her father. Solvang's childhood was completely different from Griffin's. "I never would have missed my dad's funeral," she says. "He was my hero."

As the Independence Day celebration approaches, there is plenty of drinking, and Griffin — who had been sober for two years at the time of the filming — is uncomfortable and shuns the party. "They called Tobi 'The Friendly One,'" says Griffin. "They called me 'The Old One.'"

Solvang's friendly manner is attractive to Mounir, their driver, who spent 17 years in the United States. Solvang falls in love with him.

The film shows the two doggedly pursuing government officials, who are clearly unsettled by the frank questions about AIDS and sex. One doctor explains that resources are so scarce that health workers use latex gloves until they fall apart. Patients, explains a nurse, are instructed to bring their own beds to the hospital.

With the pomp and ceremony of Independence Day as a backdrop, the government encourages reconciliation with its former enemy, Ethiopia. We learn about Dr. Ephram, who was tortured during the war. He was slashed and given electric shocks. The soles of his feet were beaten until the skin split open; then they forced him to stand. When he fell down, his teeth were kicked out. After the war, Dr. Ephram locates his torturer in a work camp. He gives the man who tormented him a bag of oranges and tells him he forgives him.

And then, to her horror, Solvang learns that Mounir contracted a sexually transmitted disease — making him a prime candidate for getting the AIDS virus. She knows then that Mounir lied about never having unprotected sex. It is then that Solvang also knows that she might have contracted HIV.

"I wondered how I could be so stupid," she says. "My first reaction was, 'If only we weren't doing a documentary about AIDS.'" In the film, we see Solvang humiliated by going back to the same doctors she interviewed, now seeking advice about her personal dilemma.

Meanwhile, Griffin takes a journey through remote, mountainous land to find an ancient monastery where mummies, some 1,500 years old, are kept. "This was where I had my own funeral for my father," she says.

Solvang also learns something about forgiveness while maintaining a sardonic sense of humor. "With so much death around me, I longed to be a mother," she says. "Mounir skillfully played on my fantasy. But I knew I couldn't blame Mounir. Maybe I should give him a bag of oranges."

continued on page 24

White Hotel from page 22

The film ends when, a year later, Solvang gets the results of her test for HIV. She now considers it a vivid instruction in the lexicon of life's little lessons. File this one under "trust."

White Hotel is a remarkably complex story, told in a simple, straightforward manner. What's impressive is how the filmmakers, who cross the line and enter their own subject, tell that story without hysteria, handwringing, or preaching. Many of us would not have remained so calm.

Griffin and Solvang are now trying to raise funds so they can transfer the work from video to film. The next step is to take it to the film festival circuit.

For more information, call 386-3611.