

Exploring human rights on screen

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THE potential of the medium of film to reach mass audiences on core issues of human rights, social justice and the struggles of common people, was the impetus behind the formation of the Tri-Continental Film Festival seven years ago.

The festival, which opened this week, is being screened at Cinema Nouveau, V&A Waterfront until September 27.

"Critical to our mission was the idea that we would focus on cinema from, or about the global south – Africa, Latin America and Asia. In many ways, this has been a novel approach to organising a festival, the organising principle being issues, building somewhat on the space that had been opened up by gay and lesbian film festivals, which had been around for some time," says festival director Karam Jeet Singh, who founded the festival with independent film-maker Rehad Desai.

"The ethos of the festival is about recognising the vital role film can play in the promotion and advancement of social and economic justice and human dignity by reaching mass audiences with compelling stories.

"The festival through its focus on human rights and South-South co-operation seeks to build bridges between communities who increasingly share a common experience of disempowerment, dislocation and disenfranchisement in the face of globalisation, unequal trading regimes and a world economic order dominated by securing corporate interests at the expense of local communities," Singh adds.

The festival held its opening night or the first time in Soweto's Maponya Mall last Thursday.

"Soweto has such a rich history and in many ways, since 1976 is the birthplace of the internally-driven push to end apartheid. Today 15 years on from the dawn of democracy, Soweto is a modern, vibrant, sophisticated community, which is a microcosm of the modern South Africa," says Singh.

It opened at the V&A's Cinema Nouveau, in Cape Town, last night, bringing over 60 films to audiences, including six world premieres, 19 African first showings, 22 South African films and over 15 local and international film-makers in attendance.

The line-up includes films from 25 different countries that touch on a vast assortment of topics, ranging from Tehran to Kabul, Burma (*Burma VJ*) to Venezuela, the Demilitarised Zone (*DMZ*) separating the two Koreas to the fall of the Wall, from Brazil's Amazon (*Crude*) and favelas (*Favela on Blast*) to the Cape Flats, focusing on phenomenal women, the media, political divisions, nationalism, the environment, neo-liberalism and more.

The selection includes hugely topical feature and documentary films, among them this year's opening night film *The Glass House*, directed by Hamid Rahmanian which follows four girls in Tehran, determined to pull themselves out of the margins by attending a one-of-a-kind rehabilitation facility.

The film provides audiences with a rare insight into the underclass of Iran's capital.

Also part of the line-up are six



REHAB: Hamid Rahmanian's *The Glass House*, which examines the life of four girls in Tehran, is featured at the TriContinental Film Festival.



TRUTH: Sibongile Khumalo in *Rewind: A Cantata for Voice Tape and Testimony* at the TriContinental Film Festival.



WAR CRIMES: Luis Moreno-Ocampo brings criminals to justice in *The Reckoning*.

films situated on the musical fault-lines, such as Jeffrey Levy-Hinte's *Soul Power*, Havana Marking's *Afghan Star* and *The Silver Fez*. *Soul Power*, based on *Zaire74*, a grandiose musical festival, the brainchild of Stewart Levine and Hugh Masekela, held in Kinshasa – then Zaïre – 35 years ago, weeks before the infamous Rumble in the Jungle fight between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. *Zaire74* saw James "Godfather of Soul" Brown, BB King, Celia Cruz and Miriam Makeba performing in front of 80 000 people. *The Silver Fez*, directed by Lloyd Ross and Rian Malan and wonderfully narrated by guitarist Mac McKenzie, follows the trajectory of rookie Cape Malay choir *The Continentals* ahead of the annual Cape Malay Choir competition, while *Fezeka's Voice* narrates the inspiring tale of Phume Tsewu, a choir master who gets to take his Gugulethu school choir to the Salisbury Arts Festival.

The award-winning documentary *Afghan Star* provides insight into the spirit of a war-torn country, where music offers respite and allows young hopefuls to mend ethnic and historical fissures.

Not to be missed are *The Heart of*

Jenin and *Sari Soldiers*, two documentaries, the first set in Jenin, Palestine, the latter in Nepal, that follow the stories of protagonists who in times of conflict and grief, manage to rise above hostility and retaliation, seeking peace and offering hope and humanity.

Lucinda Broadbent's *Red Oil* adopts a unique format, that of the hugely popular Latin American telenovelas (soaps) to give insight into Venezuela's state oil company PDVSA, a key role player in Chavez's revolution.

In *Anthrax War*, Bob Coen follows the trail of the international Anthrax Mafia from the US to Great Britain to Walter "Dr Death" Basson, revealing the covert support apartheid South Africa received from the West for Operation Coast.

A special category engages with the fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago, which will be commemorated on November 9 this year. Consisting of testimonies of former political prisoners (*The Last to Know*) and *Counter-Images: Filmic Subversion in the GDR 1976-1989*, 10 films made by 10 young artists on Super-8 format that provide a unique testimony to a country that no longer exists.

The festival also includes three

South African feature films: *Skin* based on the true-life story of Sandra Laing, Madoda Ncayiyana's *Izulu Lami/My Secret Sky* and *Shirley Adams*, the promising debut of Oliver Hermanus starring Denise Newman in the lead role.

"The promotion of local content and feature films, which fits with the general ethos of the festival, only ensures that we provide a well-rounded and entertaining product, which can only provide further impetus to our goal of building mass audiences for the festival," Singh states.

"The films we show are not the types of films that would normally populate the screens of commercial movies houses vastly dominated by Hollywood productions, which may be technically superior but often lack any real depth or substance," Singh explains further.

"Part of what we are also trying to do with a festival like this is to 'capture' commercial spaces – commercial cinema houses – for alternative and politically conscious material."

● Tickets cost R30. For screening schedules and bookings, see www.3continentsfestival.co.za or call Zivia on 021 788 5462.

