

Centre of the doc universe

Films on food – plus some Canadian treats – were among the fare of the prestigious International Documentary Festival

Amsterdam

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Amsterdam — The skies above may have been stormy grey, but the screens at the 18th annual International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), which concluded on Sunday, were awash in shades of "green." Some unforgettable films concerning the food we grow, manufacture and consume were prominent fare this year in IDFA's thematically wide-ranging program of creative and thought-provoking films.

Canals, bicycles and coffeehouses are perhaps the first images that come to mind when most people think of the pretty, laid-back European city, but for 11 days they are just part of the scenery while films, debates and networking unfold centre stage. The pre-eminent event of its kind in the world, IDFA has long been an important destination for the Canadian doc industry -- for those with a film to launch or sell in Europe (Ric Esther Bienstock's *Sex Slaves* and Shelley Saywell's *Hamas Behind the Mask* were well received) and particularly for those participating in the forum. Although the three-day pitching event at times resembles speed-dating (with a paying audience), the forum is nevertheless an efficient way for filmmakers with a developed project (and at least one broadcaster attached) to drum up additional interest and funding.

But for the public (which turned out at the festival in record numbers this year thanks, in part, to persistent rain) finished films are the big deal. The opening-night film, *Sisters in Law*-- a vibrant *cinéma vérité* story of female legal professionals making at difference in Cameroon -- held the top spot on the audience-favourite list throughout the entire festival. Women's rights were also at the centre of another buzz film, *Le Voyage des femmes de Zartale*, about a tuberculosis-ridden Afghan family's three-day trek to the hospital (a "beautiful" film despite its heavy subject, according to Sean Farnel, former documentary programmer for the Toronto International Film Festival, now artistic director of Hot Docs).

With non-fiction features continuing to engage audiences, IDFA offers great one-stop shopping to get a jump on next year's potential festival hits, theatrical releases and doc trends. North American audiences can expect many of the real-life stories behind the food on our plates to land on big and small screens next year: In *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* (opening in four U.S. cities next month, with plans for Canadian dates and a wider release to follow), one fascinating, slightly eccentric man's personal tale of loss and redemption becomes the narrative to also tell the bigger story of "the family farm." Advertisements

On the flipside, the Austrian films *We Feed the World* (which just broke domestic box-office records for documentaries, with young people buying the majority of tickets) and *Our Daily Bread* (which won IDFA's special jury award) are both highly cinematic films that look at industrialized agriculture and food production -- yet are completely different

in tone and intent. With Austin, Tex., filmmaker Richard Linklater in production on a film based on the best-selling book *Fast Food Nation* (as SXSW film festival programmer Matt Dentler, looking for films at IDFA, pointed out), we will most certainly be watching what we eat in the coming months.

Not surprisingly, the war on terror continues to be a bottomless pit of ideas for filmmakers. The Sundance festival hit *Why We Fight*, which showed at several North American festivals this year including TIFF, was well received. *Gitmo: The New Rules of War*, in which the two young, affable and award-winning Swedish filmmakers try to find out what's going on in Guantanamo Bay, will likely translate well on this side of the Atlantic.

Even more compelling -- yet farther under the radar -- is Samira Goetschel's *Our Own Private Bin Laden*, a film made over three years that explores Osama bin Laden's notoriety without using a single image of the man. Goetschel, based in Toronto for the past four years, was born in Iran, left with her family after her father was killed, and grew up mostly in the United States, attending New York University film school. She interviews people such as former Pakistan president Benazir Bhutto and Jimmy Carter's former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, weaving together a provocative yet still personal film that, quite eerily at times, addresses many of the same issues explored in the fictional *Syriana*.

Among several documentaries telling stories from Africa, *Sisters in Law* was not the sole uplifting film. Another crowd-pleaser, *The Refugee All Stars*, which picked up the grand jury prize for best documentary at the American Film Institute (AFI) festival in Los Angeles just days before hitting IDFA, tells the story of a group of Sierra Leonean musicians who have been living, and playing, in the camps of neighbouring Guinea for many years. The film follows the band as they return to Freetown, record an album and decide whether they will move back home. As it turns out, the forum wasn't the only place where filmmakers were hustling their wares; the directors of *The Refugee All Stars* did a very brisk business in CD and T-shirt sales. With 100 per cent of the proceeds going directly to the band, *The Refugee All Stars* was the hands-down winner in IDFA's unofficial feel-good department.

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