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Saturday, September 06, 2008

The First Strike Out

By MovieJay

I was on a 6-movie roll to start the festival, but the doc ***Unwanted Witness*** is the first strike out, to my surprise. It has enough meat on it's bones to make a great short film, since it's good for about half an hour, then it repeats itself the next half hour, and then it meanders in it's closing 30 minutes. Hollman Morris is a brave and courageous journalist who works and lives in Colombia, one of the worst places in the world to be a warrior of virtue, especially when you work the drug-smuggling guerilla beat. Powerful interests control the media in Colombia, and voices such as Morris' are not only ignored, but ridiculed. We see him in action, gathering testimonials from mostly family farmers who have had the most to lose from the so-called "War on Drugs". Their farms are set ablaze, and their food supply is contaminated by government militias and well-funded guerilla extremist groups. Mass burials are uncovered, and in one shocking scene, filmed on a portable digital camera, we see still shots of dismembered bodies, scattered and buried in the countryside.

The film hits the ground running in it's first third, and I expected that it would make an argument encompassing not only the culpability of the Colombia regime, but also of the involvement of the United States, but the movie steers clear of any big-picture ideas, and instead lets us feel what it's like to be Hollman Morris, in his work and with his family, living with a constant undercurrent of suppression and menace that seems to exist everywhere but is never seen. On that level, ***Unwanted Witness*** works just fine, but then we're overloaded with the testimonials of local families and a littyany of injustices, and then the movie takes a sentimental turn in it's last third and simply wants us to "feel" for Morris. Maybe what I just wrote sounds kind of heartless, but I was already feeling for Morris from the get-go. I think the mistake of the film is that the makers of it are so entrenched in the fact of the injustice that is inflicted on the working poor in rural Colombia, that it never really charges ahead to make a powerful argument or to point the camera at the internal workings of the Colombian gov't and the special interests who control the media. There is a truly great film in here somewhere, yearning to bust loose, but it drowns in needless sentimentality.

Yes Madam, Sir is a powerful and inspiring documentary about Kiran Bedi, India's first female police commissioner. In fact, she was the first female to join the Police Service, back in 1972, and we learn that she nearly had to go to court to secure that position. Talk about Serpico turned on it's head: through the use of still images and newspaper headlines and firsthand accounts from former police officers and members of the upper brass, we're told a seemingly mythological sequence at the beginning of her career during the Punjabi seperatist riots where Bedi, wielding but a wooden stick, fought back a crowd of roughly 3,000 Sikhs, many of who armed with swords. Until that point she got absolutely no respect, looked down on for being a woman and former champion tennis star, and called "That Girl"; after that riot, it was "Sir". Asked point blank, "Weren't you afraid for your life?", she replies, big-eyed and proud, "NO! I was very focused!".

Yes Madam, Sir, directed by first-timer Megan Doneman, does a skillful job of modulating between the unlikely career achievements and larger-than-life appeal of Bedi by showing us

scenes of up-close intimacy from within her very well guarded home, shared with her aging father and young adult daughter. They bring her down to earth the best they can, and so too does her husband, who she goes without seeing and who leads an independent life of his own some 900 kilometres away. We learn on one visit that it's the first time they've seen each other in nearly 3 years. No, that's not a typo. That's Kiran Bedi, an awe-inspiring international figure who faced corruption head on, who single-handedly reformed the country's largest and most notorious prison, and who finally went to the streets and set up educational programs for youngsters when the powers-that-be no longer had a position for her, since they resented the reforms and the spotlight that would follow her everywhere. Narrated by Helen Mirren, with a solid score, this 6 year effort by Australian Megan Doneman is one of the best documentaries you'll see at the festival this year. What a good movie.

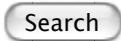
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