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# Breaking Down Barriers

## Four Powerful Films from the Annual Human Rights Festival

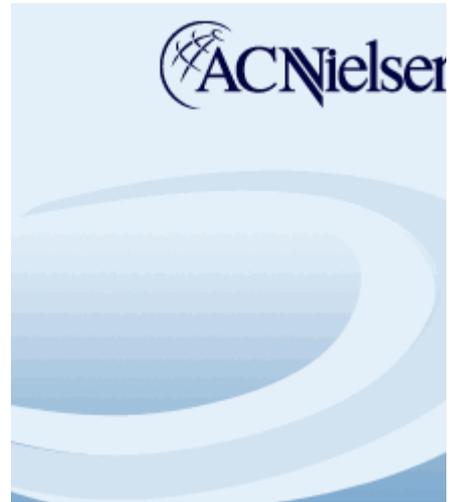
### Breaking Down Barriers

by Maria Garcia

In Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), Hollywood director John Sullivan (Joel McCrea) yearns to make a movie that will realize "the potentialities of film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is." It's the era of the Great Depression and Sullivan's producers only reluctantly agree to his scheme to travel the U.S. in search of a true story-as long as that story contains "a little sex." Sturges' comedy exposes an industry secret that wasn't really a secret then, and isn't one now: Sixty years later, "a little sex" still sells a lot of films. As for "potentialities," you can see those at your local art house.

Movies are expensive and few producers can afford to take risks on socially conscious films which play primarily to art-house audiences. The handful of large distributors in the U.S. are even less inclined to distribute a narrative film or a documentary that in their estimation lacks broad appeal. Ascribing blame for the lack of socially conscious films in neighborhood theatres doesn't begin or end with producers and distributors. You're reading one of the few U.S. magazines that each year publishes a feature article about the annual Human Rights Watch Film Festival, the premier venue for socially conscious short and feature-length documentaries and narrative films.

The festival, which screened in London in March and New York in June, is in its tenth year. In 2005, highlights from the festival will travel to 40 other cities in the U.S. and Canada. In the eight years I have been attending as a journalist, and as a New Yorker at public screenings, I have seen dozens of insightful, thoughtful, riveting films, but few of them ever get theatrical



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releases. In the present political climate, and given the limitations of a magazine article, it seemed more sensible to talk to a few committed filmmakers whose work premiered in New York this year, rather than write about the entire festival, as I usually do. My unabashedly subjective choices are four outstanding feature-length documentaries: Maria Ramos' *Justiça*, Simone Britton's *Wall*, Helene Klodowsky's *No More Tears Sister: Anatomy of Hope and Betrayal*, and Duco Tellegen's *Living Rights*. *Justiça*, which was picked up by First Run Features, is the only one with a U.S. distributor.

None of these documentaries contains even "a little sex," but they do represent "potentialities." They're proof that every film which begins with hope, but then leads us down a difficult path to disappointment and failure (very much like the course of true love in American screen comedies, *Sullivan's Travels* among them), undoubtedly ends in transformation, our transformation. We experience it, as we do in the presence of every work of art, when we see through the eyes of another. Afterward, we are somehow different, and better.

The four documentaries transport us to seven different countries and introduce us to more than a dozen people, some of whom we get to know quite intimately and, finally, to millions of others whose lives are writ large by a defining wall. That wall, the subject of Britton's *Wall*, is the one being constructed by Israel to divide it from Palestine. Actually, all of these documentaries are about walls, the tangible, insidious and invisible walls erected by governments, economic structures and social custom, which restrict freedom of expression and self-actualization, and which reduce justice to a random event.

For Tellegen, whose *Living Rights* focuses on three children at critical turning points in their lives (he's editing two other segments), the key to deconstructing these barriers is to make a documentary rich in detail. The Dutch filmmaker accomplishes this by spending nearly three weeks with each child. "Dividing things into good and bad doesn't do justice to life," Tellegen contends. "In life, maybe you have to choose between bad and not so bad and very bad." Among Tellegen's protagonists are Lena, who is Russian, and Toti, who is a Maasai. Lena must choose between the home she now shares with her foster mother near Chernobyl or one she could have with a foster family in Italy. Toti, who is 14, ran away from home when she was 11 because her father had arranged to marry her off in exchange for cattle.

*Living Rights* is steeped in opacity, in situations where any decision could court grief, confusion or outright exclusion. In a culture that still practices genital mutilation, Toti's refusal to marry makes her a pariah among the Maasai; her decision doomed her sister to the fate that would have befallen her had she not run away. On the other hand, without the cattle, Toti's family would have starved. Toti now lives in a shelter with other "rescued" girls, but she yearns to reconcile with her family. Lena, who may need an operation to cure a disease she's developed as a result of her exposure to Chernobyl's radiation, nevertheless enjoys life with a loving, although deeply conflicted, foster mother. "Lena's mother is in doubt about whether to give her up," Tellegen declares, "but at the same time, Lena is well taken care of." As for Toti, Tellegen ruminates: "I must say that it was difficult for her father to do differently." In ambiguity, Tellegen finds truth. "I like this type of story. If you look for the guilt, you make a Hollywood film, and I don't make that kind of film."

Maria Ramos, a Brazilian-Dutch filmmaker, combed the courts of Rio de Janeiro to find the two young men whose stories she depicts in *Justiça*, or *Justice*. Through courtroom sequences, and astonishingly eloquent scenes that provide glimpses into the professional and private lives of the judges, a particularly committed and overburdened defense lawyer, and the accused and their families, she discovers a microcosm of Brazilian society. "After I saw the criminal court," Ramos admits, "I didn't feel I had to go out of those rooms." Like Tellegen, Ramos studied film in the Netherlands and believes, unequivocally, that it is anathema to depict events or people as transparent. "I am always interested in interactions between people, especially people of different classes. The bad rich and the very poor who have dignity-I have no interest in these stereotypes."

Ramos, who had to seek the permission of a plethora of officials from the judiciary and the prisons, and who would film only those who wished to be in the documentary, eventually received all the releases she needed. "I approached the families, the lawyer, the judges, and I said, 'I want to make a film that avoids stereotypes.' Of course, they were very happy because the



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justice system is portrayed in a one-sided manner by the media." Ramos admits that Rio's courts are among Brazil's most efficient, but efficiency is no guarantee of justice. "The progressive judge and the defense lawyer knew my film was going to be critical of the system," Ramos admits. "This explains why it has been so well-received in Brazil, even by judges and defense lawyers. But more important, the film does not blame them. It puts everything in context. They are all prisoners of a system."

If walls, real and imagined, provide a thematic underpinning for the four documentaries, imprisonment is their shared leitmotif. In Simone Britton's *Wall*, Shuli Dichter, an Israeli, claims that in building the wall around Israel, the founders of the state, survivors of the Holocaust, are replicating their wartime experiences. He compares the walled-in Israel to the Lodz ghetto. Asked what proportion of the Israeli population shares Dichter's opinion, Britton writes in an e-mailed response: "While what Shuli Dichter says is the expression of one single and brilliant thinking person, I won't enter into statistics about minorities and majorities. My film is not a statistical survey for or against the wall. It is a meditation about it." Britton, who speaks French, Arabic and Hebrew, by virtue of her parents' mixed marriage and her education, is Moroccan-born and Jewish.

Among the many interviews in *Wall* of ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, there is one with Amos Yaron, Israel's defense minister. Seated at a desk and flanked by two Israeli flags, he explains, with tight-lipped ferocity, the events that led to the decision to build the wall. "What Amos Yaron says is the common official argumentation about the wall, what you can hear and read every day coming from Israeli officials," Britton declares. "Like all propaganda, it includes lies and internal contradictions, but it also expresses the true conception of the people in power." At one point, near the end of the film, Yaron says that Israel protects both sides of the wall because it lays claim to what lies on either side. At HRWFF's public screening, a collective gasp followed Yaron's proclamation. "No doubt the Sharon government believes that 'both sides are ours,'" Britton responds when asked about the remark. "And they are acting in accordance to that."

In stark contrast to the monolithic representation of imprisonment which Britton obliges us to contemplate, Helene Klodawsky's *No More Tears Sister* asks that we consider the ephemeral but no less prodigious barriers confronted by women revolutionaries. Like Tellegen's *Living Rights*, Klodawsky's *No More Tears Sister* is overtly cinematic; both filmmakers have a keen eye for color and composition. What all four share is a deep concern for justice; in Klodawsky's case, it's for women caught up in the battles of ethnic nationalism.

Klodawsky's protagonist is Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a human-rights activist who was murdered in 1989 after returning to the confines of her embattled island-nation of Sri Lanka. She was 35. Rajani, a Christian Tamil, initially joined the Tamil Tigers to fight for an independent Tamil state. Through her poetic letters to her sister and her husband, which constitute Klodawsky's narrative track, the filmmaker crafts a documentary that's not quite *cinéma-vérité*. "As a documentary filmmaker, I think that *cinéma-vérité* leads to truth, but in this case the opposite was true," she says. Reinactments of Rajani's life dot the film, and for good reason: "I couldn't film in Jaffna where Rajani lived. The people Rajani knew couldn't speak to me. They're still in danger. I could not live with the fact that they would be targets the next day after I filmed them."

Rajani returned to Sri Lanka in 1986 to take up a university post after three years on scholarship in England. She wanted her daughters to grow up in Sri Lanka, and she wished to be reunited with her husband Dayapala, a Sinhalese rebel. Rajani's mixed marriage, like her life, tested the bounds of the status quo: Rajani and Dayapala were not just separated by their ethnicity, but also by religion and social class. Klodawsky mines the riches of this complex relationship to illustrate all the ways in which Rajani and other revolutionary women are hindered, but also the many devices by which they retain their intellectual, spiritual and sexual freedom. "Rajani and her husband, because of the very courageous people they were and are, constantly thought about the relationship between the personal and the political," Klodawsky declares. "I don't think they saw politics as outside of themselves."

Rajani eventually broke with the Tamil Tigers, and many believe it was the rebel group who killed her. Klodawsky, a Canadian, who made her documentary as part of the National Film Board of Canada's series on women in war, was moved by Rajani's transformation, and by that of Dayapala, who

is still alive. "Rajani was one of a generation of young idealists-in the U.S., in Europe and in Sri Lanka-who thought a better world could be created. As a result of the oppression against the Tamil minority, she transformed herself from a revolutionary thinker to a nationalist and then to a militant. She became a human-rights activist out of that and rethought the whole revolutionary armed struggle."

*No More Tears Sister*, *Wall*, *Justice* and *Living Rights* are stylistically distinct-Britton's contemplative approach, for instance, is reminiscent of transcendentalist Robert Bresson, while Ramos' methods remind you of Frederick Wiseman-but each documentary is an object lesson in fine editing. Klodawsky, Ramos and Tellegen share a similar *mise-en-scène*: They explore the microcosm to illustrate the macrocosm. They see the world reflected in the faces of their subjects. "I hope the children in my film look like the children from your own street," Tellegen tells me. Ramos says that audiences most remember the anguished mother of an accused boy. "In some ways," Ramos admits, "she expresses everything." Klodawsky, upon learning that she and I are about the same age, the age Rajani would be now if she were alive, declares that she's discovered an audience apart from baby boomers: "I had a feeling the film would play well to women of our age, but so many young women are telling me that Rajani is a hero for them."

*Wall* inspects the macrocosm and plunges us, regardless of our ethnicity, into a contemplation of our complicity in not resisting the wall: Is the wall a reflection of our collective and imprisoned spirits? "Palestinians write political slogans of resistance on the wall," Britton responds when asked about the differences between the Israeli side and the Palestinian side. "It's a way to express their anger and prove their existence, like a prisoner writes his name on the wall of his cell." As for the Israelis who paint their side of the wall, Britton says: "Israeli settlers act like all rich, modern Occidental society; their municipalities hire artists to decorate the streets and the wall. They try to hide the military aspect of it with naive colored paintings and flowers."

During my conversation with Tellegen, we talk about the move to the political right in our respective countries. Tellegen claims that there are just as many leftists in the Netherlands as there always were: "The conservatives, they're just screaming louder. I call them the screaming right." Tellegen nevertheless decries the resulting loss of thought in the midst of the cacophony. "I hope the world will be less judging and more thinking. Life is more than what is good and what is bad, these judgments we make every day. Life is so much bigger."

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