

Miss HIV: A Film to Change How the World Sees HIV/AIDS

"Miss HIV is, quite simply, the best documentary I've ever seen, and the one with the most potential to change a horrible reality for the better."

A review by John Jalsevac

September 2, 2008 (LifeSiteNews.com) - Miss HIV, a documentary from Ethnographic Media, is a film of an unexpected beauty on a subject that is anything but beautiful - HIV/AIDS and the international struggle of competing HIV/AIDS policies. (<http://www.egm.tv>)

At the core of the film is the burning question: "Why, after countless billions of dollars have been spent on HIV/AIDS prevention and cures, is there still no end in sight? Why are millions still dying of a preventable disease?" Implied is the much more volatile query: "Who is to blame?"

By the time the credits roll, the film leaves no doubt where it stands: those who promote an ideology of casual sex at all costs, under the guise of a mistaken interpretation of unfettered "human rights", are the foes of the effort to end AIDS. They are those who are so radical in their beliefs that they can claim, with a straight face, as one speaker did at the 2006 International AIDS Conference, that the same program that promotes abstinence and fidelity and that reduced HIV rates in Uganda from 30% to 6%, "has become a nightmare, a devil, a tool of murder in Africa."

This same speaker, who is herself HIV-positive, then suggested that those with HIV, a sexually-transmitted disease that has killed 25 million people to date, have an unassailable "right to sex": which naturally leads one to wonder who is murdering whom.

And yet, where most other documentaries on a subject of such a controversial nature would swiftly devolve into polemics and pure propaganda, the makers of Miss HIV opt instead for creating a work of art. This approach to documentary-making lends Miss HIV a transcendence, a universality of appeal that ensures that it cannot easily be written off as mere propaganda.

Miss HIV is a truly beautiful film. The cinematography is delicate and evocative and evidences a skilled artist working behind the lens. So too with the soundtrack and the various visual effects, which are equally powerful. But what is most important is that the documentarians chose to approach their subject matter not in a removed, academic fashion, but as a story.

As a story Miss HIV emphasizes the human impact of the battle over HIV/AIDS, transporting the viewer into the lives of a compelling cast of characters, each member of which has been affected in one way or another by the disease. AIDS-prevention policies are in this way brought down from the abstract to the concrete, from mere ideas that sound nice and that are discussed in posh board rooms and conferences in wealthy Western cities, to ideas that determine whether someone, somewhere lives or dies.

Like any truly great storyteller, the camera treats each of the characters in Miss HIV sympathetically, affirming that each of their stories is worth telling. This holds true even (or most especially) for those who in the end are found to be the story's villains - those who protect and promote the radical casual sex ideology in the face of its abysmal failure, and who purposely downplay the risk of AIDS as a misguided method of removing "stigma" and "discrimination."

This objective, non-condemnatory approach to story-telling is good and necessary, for the fact is that human beings are rarely malicious; this is especially true for those who have devoted their lives to some sort of advocacy, such as eliminating AIDS. Such as these are rarely malicious, though they may be wrong - even fatally wrong. As the director of the film, Jim Hanon, states, "Since when does conflict in a story have to mean demonizing people and their points of view?"

Many an otherwise admirable work has been spoiled by this tendency to demonize the opposition, an approach that ensures: 1) that only one sort of people will ever watch it (those who already agree with its thesis) and, 2) that those who agree with it and watch it will only be more confirmed in the insufferable sense of superiority which erects walls between people and destroys any hope of true dialogue. Miss HIV is a model of how to avoid this pitfall, and other documentarians and writers should take note.

The documentary takes its name from the Miss HIV pageant, which takes place in Botswana. The event was organized to showcase attractive, healthy-looking women who are also HIV-positive in an effort to eradicate "stigma" and raise awareness. The film follows two of these women on their journey to the Miss HIV catwalk, and places us in the midst of their lives and

their families. Interwoven throughout is footage from the 2006 International AIDS Conference, interviews with various experts and activists, and intimate snapshots of life in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the world's HIV epidemic is most concentrated.

What is gradually revealed is, in part, the absurdity and hypocrisy of an ideology that is built upon the idea of radical human freedom, and that seeks to normalize HIV in order to erase "stigma", but that in turn stigmatizes anyone who even suggests abstinence or fidelity may be a solution to what is, after all, a sexually-transmitted disease.

As Martin Ssempe, the electric young Ugandan pastor who has been so instrumental in reducing HIV rates in his country, says, "You know what I find? I find that these guys have an irrational fear of abstinence. I mean they're paranoid. When you say the word abstinence they go 'Arraghagh! Stop!' And then, if you really want to get them riled up, say something about faithful in marriage. They want to pull their hair out!"

This would be a lot funnier if it weren't the literal truth. You may recall that at the 2006 AIDS conference Bill Gates gave a speech in which, in passing, he mentioned the ABC (Abstinence, Be faithful, use a Condom) policy, at which point he was booed down. The makers of Miss HIV include that scene. It is very disturbing to watch. A convention center packed to the rafters with the world's most powerful AIDS policy makers apparently cannot even bear the mention of abstinence and faithfulness. As Ssempe says, these people are "abstinophobic" and "matriphobic."

But Miss HIV is not a depressing film. It does not play about in the muck for a minute longer than is necessary to prove its point. Otherwise we are introduced to the magnetic personality of Martin Ssempe and his joy-filled approach to ministering to the youth of Uganda. And we are introduced to those who have embraced his model of premarital chastity, a way of life that, in contrast to its opposite, is free from fear - the fear of contracting, living with, and dying of AIDS, and the fear of living without a love that is lasting and unconditional.

To put it more positively, abstinence and fidelity are convincingly presented not simply as an answer to AIDS that, by forbidding some good thing (the pleasures of sex) can thereby prevent a worse evil (contracting AIDS), but as a way of life that itself offers new and greater goods than what it forbids. Who can doubt this fact after watching footage of Martin Sempa enthusiastically partying with thousands of teens who have committed to pre-marital abstinence? "Nowhere is it written that being sexually abstinent means equal to being boring," he says. "Thou shalt not

have fun." Martin Ssempe, it is clear, knows how to have fun - certainly a lot more than those dower-faced HIV-positive men and women who contracted the disease by exercising their "human rights" and indiscriminately having sex with strangers.

No matter how many times someone with HIV says that sex should be had and enjoyed whenever possible, they will never be a fraction as convincing as a Martin Ssempe, who is brimming with a joy and innocence that these others will never have and that is more attractive than anything they can offer.

Miss HIV is perhaps the only film made about HIV that faces the disease with such brutal honesty, but that still leaves the viewer with such a powerful sense of hope. It is a film that must be supported and watched and promoted. It is, quite simply, the best documentary I've ever seen, and the one with the most potential to change a horrible reality for the better.

To purchase Miss HIV, or to find out more about the film, see:

<http://www.ethnographic.tv/>