

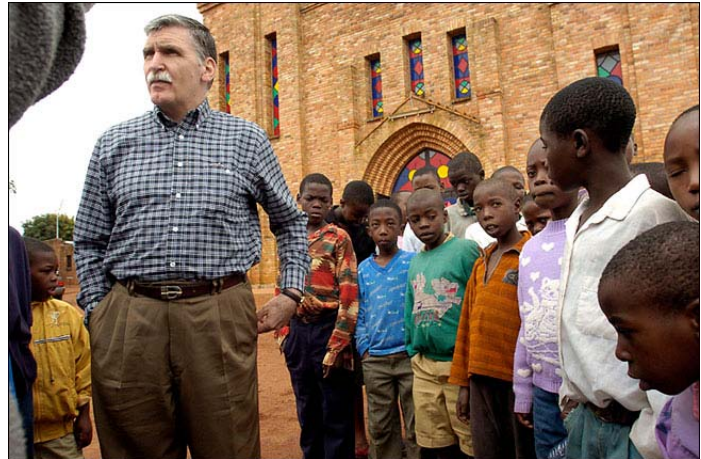
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## Nonfiction Is Flavor of Moment for Films

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Cute children, family conflicts, social blights - the big three subjects of documentary features are currently on screen in films like "[Mad Hot Ballroom](#)," "[Tell Them Who You Are](#)" and "[Shake Hands With the Devil](#)," part of an explosion of nonfiction films into theaters. But this boom, inspired by hits like "[Spellbound](#)" and "Fahrenheit 9/11," has its downside. Every week seems to bring another mediocre documentary, coasting on the strength of its content and its similarity to a better, more artistic film. Even as the genre leaps out of its niche, it is suffering from a tyranny of substance over style.



Peter Bregg/Maclean's "Shake Hands With the Devil" follows a former United Nations general to Rwanda a decade after the genocide he could not prevent.

"Mad Hot Ballroom," the feel-good story of a dancing contest for New York City public school children, is the singing, dancing, less talented cousin of "Spellbound," the sly 2002 movie that turned a spelling bee into a thought-provoking portrait of class and education.

"Tell Them Who You Are," [Mark Wexler's](#) pedestrian work about his father, the great and cranky cinematographer [Haskell Wexler](#), can't help but bring to mind "My Architect," Nathaniel Kahn's brilliant 2003 film about his father, Louis I. Kahn.

And while such echoes are inevitable, occasionally they favor the newer film. "Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire," follows the former United Nations general back to Rwanda a decade after the genocide he and his peacekeeping force were helpless to prevent. This harrowing film is more effective than last year's overrated Oscar winner, "[Born Into Brothels](#)," which begins as a heart-wrenching vision of children in Calcutta's red-light district but turns into a self-aggrandizing account of efforts by the film's co-director, Zana Briski, to help them. The sight of impoverished children is always touching, but it doesn't always make a good movie.

Digital technology has made filmmaking so cheap and easy that now almost anyone can point a camera at a difficult father or a wicked stepmother and call it a movie. And more of them are making it into theaters. Nielsen EDI, which tracks box-office data, found that 50 documentaries were released in 2002 and 53 in 2003 - a number that jumped to 80 last year (a rapidly growing chunk of the 500 or so films typically released each year).

The success of "Spellbound" and "Fahrenheit 9/11" seems to be propelling the surge. In separate phone interviews, both Sheila Nevins, president of documentary and family programming at HBO, and Nancy Buirski, founder and executive director of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in Durham, N.C., pointed to those works as likely incentives for filmmakers and distributors who are grabbing for the next nonfiction blockbuster, sometimes recklessly.

"People are buying up everything," Ms. Nevins said, even commissioning documentaries on the basis of three- or four-minute samples. As one gauge of a market gone wild, she pointed to "Mad Hot Ballroom," which Paramount Classics and Nickelodeon bought for a reported \$2 million. "That's the kind of film that might have sold for about \$250,000 five years ago," she said. (Paramount bought world rights, excluding Australia, which only emphasizes the genre's reach.)

Ms. Buirski, who fielded more than 930 submissions for 77 slots at last month's Full Frame festival, said she found "far greater proficiency even in first-time filmmakers" than when the festival began seven years ago.

Too often, though, that competence translates into the commercial slickness of a "Mad Hot Ballroom." While the film coaxes the audience to cheer for 11-year-olds doing the rumba (and who is churlish enough to resist that?), it glosses over the sociology behind its uplifting story. The Washington Heights school at the center of the film is attended largely by children of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, many from poor or troubled homes. All this is mentioned and breezed past, which leaves viewers with a nagging question: just what are we, and these children, being uplifted from?

The cute-but-competitive child movie doesn't have to be so icky-sweet or shallow. ["Rock School"](#) (opening June 3) follows students in a Philadelphia music school that existed before the [Jack Black](#) comedy ["School of Rock."](#) The wholesome-looking 12-year-old guitarist who plays Black Sabbath in the film is just as adorable (and less cloying) than a roomful of pint-size merengue dancers in "Ballroom." And "Rock School" is more articulate about its subtext: why are these children playing music older than they are?

"Spellbound" actually embraces social issues, as smart children of privilege compete with smart children of poverty. Whom to root for, and why, becomes a complicated equation.

"Tell Them Who You Are" belongs to a simpler category: film as personal catharsis. Mark Wexler, now middle-aged, earnestly sets out to capture a father who was sometimes brutal on his son's ego and evidently still is. Haskell Wexler is seen on screen ordering his son around and making himself seem important. That's not hard to do when, early on, a nervous Mark Wexler loses the sound while taping his father's 80th-birthday party. The son's documentary seems like the ultimate in passive-aggressive filmmaking.

But where Mark Wexler makes himself the point, Nathaniel Kahn knew how to get out of his own way. "My Architect" flowered from a personal quest into a graceful study of Louis Kahn's work and of the women who put up with his multiple families. The film is a telling portrait of the emotional complexity behind so many family relationships.

Similarly, the deftly shaped "Shake Hands With the Devil" is more than one man's journey. As Mr. Dallaire returns to sites where torture and genocide took place, his narrative is reinforced with news clips and amateur video from a decade earlier. Those images can make the documentary tough to sit through, but it is also as compelling as its central character, a man haunted by his failed attempt to save all those lives. Moving beyond its devastating subject, the film expands into broader questions of political and personal responsibility.

Even the most successful political documentaries are not likely to approach the box office numbers of [Michael Moore's](#) artful, entertaining "Fahrenheit 9/11," which was propelled by election-year frenzy. But that hasn't stopped less creative filmmakers from trying, and being overpraised for their modest efforts. "Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room" has a topical subject, a lucidly told story, and no more flair than a cheap documentary on cable television.

There are still documentaries transformed by an artist's vision, though. [Werner Herzog's "Grizzly Man"](#) (opening in August) is built around video shot by Timothy Treadwell during 13 summers spent living among grizzlies, before he was eaten by one. Mr. Treadwell's own hyperactive commentary would have made for something like a nature film on acid. Mr. Herzog's editing and narration turn it into a study of Mr. Treadwell's outsize, self-invented character, and of the motives behind such heroic posturing. In the flood of cheap-and-easy nonfiction films, "Grizzly Man" is something increasingly hard to find: a documentary with imagination.