



Dorfman and Raymont in Santiago last December: For a couple of years after the coup in Chile, Dorfman says, 'I couldn't find the words against the darkness.' JULIO DONOSO

## Death and the documentarian

After his acclaimed film about Roméo Dallaire and Rwanda, director Peter Raymont turns to another witness to a national tragedy – Chile's Ariel Dorfman

BY LIAM LACEY

The past couple of years have been a period of career highs and personal loss for Toronto filmmaker Peter Raymont. His wife, documentary filmmaker Lindalee Tracey, succumbed to cancer last October after a five-year illness.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, Raymont had seen international recognition for one of the more than 100 documentaries he has made in his 35-year career. *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire* won the audience award at the Sundance Film Festival and the top prize at the International Human Rights Film Festival in Paris and received positive reviews



across North America. It also brought him to the Full Frame documentary festival in Durham, N.C., in April, 2005, where he was a member of a panel called The Artist in the Time of War.

The moderator was writer Ariel Dorfman, a professor at nearby Duke University and a writer intimately associated with human rights (*Death and the Maiden*) and particularly the Chilean coup of 1973. Dorfman opened the panel with a poem he had written for the occasion.

Raymont says he was "blown away" by Dorfman. Expecting

an intimidating, and perhaps embittered, leftist intellectual who was famous for his contentious writings, instead he met an articulate, gentle man brimming with affection and interest in other people.

Like Dallaire, Dorfman is a person marked by a historical trauma who seemed to have come back from the pit with a sense of mission. Critics sometimes call him overbearing, but that impression is diminished in person, or on film. Dorfman speaks extremely well on his feet and has a great deal of personal charm.

Initially, Raymont shot a short film in New York, where Dorfman spent his childhood, for Canadian television's Bravo! channel.

» SEE 'DORFMAN' PAGE R2

### TIFF GETS ROLLING ONLINE

Red-carpet glamour, backroom deals – oh yes, and the movies. The Globe and Mail has TIFF 2007 covered.

**Tune in:** Watch exclusive video of festival highlights

**Take a look:** See photos of TIFF's top stars

**Play paparazzi:** Send us your celebrity shots

**You're the editor:** Send our festival blogger

on her next behind-the-scenes mission

**Plan your fest:** Insider tips and movie info

to help you hit top TIFF films

[globeandmail.com/tiff2007](http://globeandmail.com/tiff2007) »

## 'We all felt Lindalee's spirit was there with us'

» Dorfman has written before about the parallel assaults on two cities of his life, Santiago and New York, 28 years apart on the same date. When the film was finished, Raymont knew that he had the makings of a longer movie.

Dorfman's life has given him insights into not only terrorism, but also exile. The child of Eastern European Jews who had fled from the Nazis, he was born in Argentina in 1942, but raised in the United States until the age of 12. His father, an economist with the United Nations, was forced to relocate to Chile during the anti-communist witch hunts of the fifties.

Later, as a cocky young leftist literature professor at the University of Chile (he wrote the bestselling cultural-theory book *How to Read Donald Duck*), he served as a cultural adviser to Salvador Allende's democratically elected Marxist government. During the Sept. 11, 1973, military coup, he was marked for death. By chance, he escaped, initially leaving his family behind, before they relocated to Europe.

I had met Dorfman 10 years

ago at the Toronto International Film Festival and I mention that I shared Raymont's initial surprise at his warmth and openness. "It took a long time for that man to come out," Dorfman says.

For a couple of years after the coup, he felt sickened by anything that felt like political jargon: "I risked becoming a very bitter person, a vengeful person, and I couldn't write. I couldn't find the words against the darkness. I didn't want to perpetuate the old language of the past. What I think happened is that I began hearing the voices of the disappeared and felt I was at a gathering point of the living and the dead. I wrote poems that were very direct and simple, as if my mother and sisters were breathing the words into me. I was resurrected by their words."

The poems he created were published under the title *Missing* by Amnesty International in 1982. Most of his works since then, to use his words, are keeping "a promise to the dead," a phrase that has become the title of the new Peter Raymont documentary about

Dorfman, which has its premiere at TIFF this Saturday.

Dorfman felt that Raymont "had the right distance and the right proximity" to his story. He knew Raymont had previously made films about Latin America and human-rights issues. He also knew he had "personal pain," and the film would be about grief, not confrontation – a film not about revisiting the scene of the crime so much as going there to deliver a kind of elegy for the victims.

Raymont had pitched the idea of a film on Dorfman at the Toronto Documentary Forum at the Hot Docs festival in April, 2006, and secured financing from a variety of international broadcasters, including the National Geographic Latin America and the British Broadcasting Corp.

Before the film began shooting in November of last year, Raymont's wife became more ill. Near death, she entered palliative care at Toronto's Princess Margaret Hospital and Raymont stayed with her in her room. Dorfman sent daily poems for him to read to her, sometimes his own, sometimes

those of the 12th-century Sufi poet known as Rumi.

Raymont approached two other directors and asked them if they would pick up the project. Neither was available, but Dorfman was planning a trip back to Chile and Raymont decided to go as well just weeks after his wife's death. "I think it was a good decision, therapeutic on many levels," Dorfman says. "We all felt Lindalee's spirit was there with us."

"For the first couple of weeks, my mind wasn't really in it," Raymont adds. "I didn't think I should be there, but then it seemed that Lindalee was really supportive of me doing this. In a way, it became another kind of promise to the dead."

The resulting film is a collaboration. Raymont preferred to have Dorfman provide the narration for his own story and, to a point, follow the writer's quest to find an old photograph from before the coup. They never found it, but Dorfman says: "I think perhaps the best quests are those where you don't find what you were looking for, but something else."

There are visits with old friends and a woman who kept him in a safe house, at risk to her own life. One of the most compelling scenes involves a trip to the basement of the Allende Centre, in memory of former president Salvador Allende, which preserves some of the tubes of twisted phone wires used to tap into the private conversations of Chile's citizens under the dictatorship.

Shortly after the film was finished and Raymont was taking a vacation on Easter Island, he heard that General Augusto Pinochet had died. It was Dorfman's son, Rodrigo, who filmed his father's reaction to the news and encounters with mourners for the dictator on the streets of Santiago. One woman calls Dorfman "a dirty Communist." He expresses regret for her grief.

Dorfman doesn't contend that he's beyond hate, only that he refuses to play by tyrants' rules: "It's a great kick being a victim," he says. "It means you are without sin and can do anything to anyone. Bin Laden allowed Americans to feel like victims, and that's a terribly dangerous thing."