

Toronto gets political with docu crop

By Etan Vlessing

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TORONTO -- Away from the star-wattage on the Toronto International Film Festival's red carpet, documentaries about war, politics and repression are breaking through with festival audiences.

"We're getting beneath the surface, lifting the curtain on world events to reveal the truth," Canadian filmmaker Peter Raymont said Wednesday of "A Promise to the Dead." His documentary follows playwright Ariel Dorfman ("Death and the Maiden") as he returns from exile in the U.S. to his native Chile and the scenes of its bloody political power struggle in the 1970s.

"A Promise to the Dead" has been chosen by the International Documentary Assn. to screen across the U.S. in order to make it eligible for an Academy Award.

Raymont said that feature documentaries like his own feed the appetite of cinemagoers "desperate for the inner truth" of events otherwise glimpsed in newspapers or TV newscasts.

Former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, Dorfman's nemesis in Raymont's documentary, was never brought to justice before he died in late 2006.

Also bowing in Toronto is Dutch filmmaker Klaartje Quirijns' "The Dictator Hunter," which portrays an obsessive quest by New York-based human rights lawyer Reed Brody to bring another dictator, former Chadian leader Hissene Habre, to justice.

Quirijns' film captures Brody and Souleymane Guengueng, a survivor of torture at the hands of Habre's secret police, piecing together legal evidence and international support to bring a dictator to justice.

The documentary culminates with a Belgian court indicting Habre and ordering him to eventually stand trial in Senegal.

"Pinochet, he died, and never faced his victims in court. But this test case is driven by the victims and a national court in Senegal willing to take up Habre's case," Quirijns said.

The theme of people back from war pursuing justice while rebuilding their lives also is found in "Body of War." The documentary, co-directed by Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro, focuses on Tomas Young, a young wheelchair-bound Iraqi war veteran

"Going into a presidential year, we think we have a film exposing the drama taking place behind closed doors in thousands of Americans homes, where soldiers return gravely wounded and entire families are affected," Donahue said.

The former TV talk show host says that digital technology has enabled legions of filmmakers to follow the lead of Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" and reach and engage mass audiences with documentaries.

"Today, you can turn on a video camera and make an in-depth movie," he said.

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