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FILM

## Courage to Bear Witness to Man's Infinite Cruelties

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

[“A Promise to the Dead: The Exile Journey of Ariel Dorfman.”](#) the opening-night selection of this year's [Human Rights Watch](#) International Film Festival, may not be the strongest of the program's 19 feature-length films, but its rambling portrait of Mr. Dorfman, the Chilean playwright ([“Death and the Maiden”](#)), novelist and essayist, is a profile in courage colored with the anxiety of a human rights activist faced with painful moral choices.

To die a martyr or to live to bear witness: that is the question. You can read about men and women who stand up to injustice and feel a shuddering admiration. But to absorb a documentary film about such a person is a more intense and potentially life-changing experience.

Sober contemplation of man's inhumanity to man and those who combat it is the essential value of the festival, at the Walter Reade Theater through June 26. The films take you to perilous places while raising fundamental questions about the moral accountability of individuals, governments and institutions.

One theme of “A Promise to the Dead” is the pain of exile. Mr. Dorfman, who was born in Argentina, grew up in New York and settled in Chile in 1954, was a cultural adviser to the Chilean president [Salvador Allende](#), whose democratic socialist philosophy he embraced wholeheartedly. He now teaches at [Duke University](#).

Directed by Peter Raymont, who also made the excellent Rwanda-based documentary “Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire,” the movie follows Mr. Dorfman around the streets of Santiago on a return trip to Chile. He meets old friends and recalls the tumultuous time before the military coup that ousted Allende and installed the repressive regime of [Augusto Pinochet](#). Under Pinochet thousands were murdered and Mr. Dorfman was driven into exile.

He pointedly compares the events on the day of the coup, Sept. 11, 1973, to America's more recent 9/11 trauma. He had promised other Allende supporters that he would survive to tell the tale, and there came a critical moment when he had to flee or face certain execution. He kept his promise and told the story, but at a heavy price of survivor's guilt.

“Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North,” a far-reaching personal documentary examination of the slave trade directed by Katrina Browne with Alla Kovgan and Jude Ray, also addresses history and accountability. Ms. Browne, who grew up in Bristol, R.I., discovered that her ancestors, the DeWolfs, were one of the busiest slave-trading families in the United States. Researching local archives, she learned that the slave trade and its related enterprises not only made the family rich, they were also a cornerstone of the New England economy. Shaken, she organizes a party of the few relatives willing to participate, and together they retrace the steps of the triangular trade route, from the coast of Ghana to Cuba to New England.

The implications of the film are devastating. The North was the South's complicit economic enabler, and the movie suggests that the North's high-toned abolitionist rhetoric was a cover story. The old saying that "behind every great fortune there is a crime" echoes silently through the movie, which extends that notion to implicate an entire society.

Just as devastating is "[The Betrayal](#)" ("Nerakhoon"), directed by Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath, which was filmed over 23 years and follows a Laotian family's migration from Asia to a slum in a dangerous Brooklyn neighborhood. The betrayals multiply, beginning with the story of Mr. Phrasavath's father, who, after working with American forces during the secret bombing of Laos, was left to fend for himself when the Vietnam War ended. He was imprisoned and presumed dead.

The refugee family's dream of American streets paved with gold became a nightmare when they found themselves dumped in a violent, gang-infested neighborhood and given scant help. Somehow the children grew up, having survived almost unimaginable hardship.

"Traces of the Trade" and "[Betrayal](#)" are 2 of an unprecedented 20 films (including shorts) in the festival directed by women. Its centerpiece, "The Sari Soldiers," directed by Julie Bridgham, follows the struggle of Devi, an intrepid Nepalese woman, and five other women to find her daughter after she is kidnapped by members of the Royal Nepalese Army in retaliation for Devi speaking publicly about the torture and murder of her niece. Like so many of the films in the festival, it gives new meaning to the words courage and resilience.

*The festival runs through June 26 at the Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center; (212) 875-5600, [hrw.org/iff/](http://hrw.org/iff/).*

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