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Dutch Docs Deliver Yet Again

BY MARK HARRIS

One of the more impressive aspects of the past few editions of the Vancouver International Film Festival has been the high quality of its nonfictional Dutch contingent. Last year, viewers were beguiled by *O Amor Natural*, Heddy Honigmann's celebration of the erotically restorative effects of Carlos Drummond de Andrade's love poetry when read to geriatric lovers, and Jan Louter's *Jean Rhys: They Destroyed All the Roses*, a miniature



portrait of the acclaimed Dominican-born writer's troubled existence. The year before that, viewers were metaphorically blown away by *The Battle of the Java Sea*, Niek

Koppen's eye-opening examination of one of the Second World War's decisive naval engagements, and Bernie Ijdis's *The Great Post Road*, a politically engaged account of the life and hard times of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Indonesia's greatest living novelist. And then, of course, there was *Mother Dao*, *The Turtlelike*, the archival film that many Lower Mainland viewers voted best entry in the 1995 VIFF lineup.

Remarkably, this year the crop of Dutch documentaries is better than ever. Standing at the very top of the heap is *Riviera Hotel*, Bernie Ijdis's (yes, *him* again) kaleidoscopic exploration of the secret life of the last luxury hospice to be built in Havana prior to the triumph of the Castro revolution. (Interview subjects include everyone from a black American revolutionary on the lam from the FBI to a former Cuban political prisoner who suffered horribly in Communist prisons, with pit stops at all points in between; in terms of balance and objectivity, it's hard to see how the film could have been any more fair.) Also of interest are *In My Father's House*, Fatima Jebli Ouazzani's intensely personal meditation on the conflict between female independence and Islamic orthodoxy, and Heddy Honigmann's (yup, that crowd-pleaser again) ear-thrilling *The Underground Orchestra*, a tour of the highly talented émigrés whose musical offerings constitute one of the best reasons to hop a train or linger in a metro station in Paris.

Even some of this year's fictional Dutch entries contain strong documentary elements. *The Polish Bride*, directed by Karim Traïdia, deals with an abused Central European immigrant who seeks happiness in the arms of a Dutch farmer, while Ben van Lieshout's *The Stowaway* follows the romantic ups and economic downs of a disinherited Central Asian—the lake on which he used to fish has literally evap-



In My Father's House (left) looks at feminism in Islam; *The Underground Orchestra* follows musical émigrés in Paris.

orated—in the clandestine corner of Rotterdam where he tries to unobtrusively survive. While Dutch culture is by no means allergic to commercial cinema (Paul Verhoeven started out there, after all, and Fons Rademakers and Marleen Gorris have long been favourites of overseas art-house audiences), the will toward escapism seems to be notably weaker there than it is in other countries (countries with much tougher drug laws, I might add).

While some of us may find the strength of contemporary Dutch documentary surprising, we probably shouldn't. The Netherlands did give birth to Joris Ivens, after all, the nonfiction filmmaker who—along with Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov, Leni Riefenstahl, and John Grierson—helped to define what we have come to accept as documentary. What's more, since the United Nations currently rates Holland the most democratic and egalitarian nation in the world, it should come as no surprise to discover that Dutch filmmakers tend to favour a liberal, humanistic approach to social problems, a quality shared by most of the better-known postwar documentarists (Barbara Kopple, Marcel Ophuls, Jean Rouch). As for their interest in other cultures, Dutch citizens learn from an early age that foreigners seldom bother to learn their language, so they'd better master several different tongues. This necessity, no matter how annoying it may be to the locals, inevitably results in a cosmopolitan outlook.

Whatever the reason, there's no denying that the Dutch make damn good docs. One can only hope that they stay in their highly accessible, truth-telling groove for many years to come. ■