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Respect To All Creatures **INTERNATIONAL PREMIERE**

'Asshak', we learn mid-way through Ulrike Koch's ethnographic documentary about the Tuareg nomads, means 'the deep respect for the rules of conduct.' Koch's interviewee elaborates, telling us that it means 'following the good principles, the rules of good behaviour and God... Asshak and the fear of God are the same thing – respect to all creatures.'

What's startling about the film is how Koch managed to persuade the Tuareg people to allow her to film them for so many weeks. 'If they understand you and accept you, you have a key. They don't do it for the money,' Koch says. 'It also has to do with how you work on the set... you must take a respectful approach and never force a scene. They understood that we weren't there to make a fast TV documentary saying a few words about an alien culture.'

As in her earlier film, *THE SALTMEN OF TIBET*, in which she joined a team of men and yaks on a journey to the sacred salt lakes of northern Tibet, Koch observes rather than editorialises. We hear the Tuareg people describe their lives and customs in their own words.

Some of the old truisms the Tuaregs utter sound strangely familiar to Western ears. 'Women's work is

never done,' is one saying seemingly common to almost every culture on earth. There are grumbles, albeit expressed in lyrical fashion, about the errant behaviour of the menfolk. 'A husband is like the shadow of a tree in the morning that leaves you behind underneath the scorching sun,' one elderly lady complains. A young girl tells us about who sits where in her affections. 'I love my little brother above everything else and I love my goat.' In one extraordinary sequence, we see the women erecting a tent in the desert under which an expectant mother will give birth.

'The Tuaregs are so modern, so close to us,' Koch says. 'They are berbers and berbers all over are a very strong women-oriented society. That was one of the points in making the film – to show the strength of women in a Muslim society.'

Koch has an eye both for the oppressive beauty of the desert landscapes the nomads traverse and for humorous visual asides. She includes imagery of sandstorms and of torrents but also of ostriches strutting across the desert. (One Tuareg likens them to 'well-dressed people in indigo.')

Born in Germany, Koch studied Sinology, Japano-



logy and Ethnology at Zürich and Beijing Universities. But despite her academic background, she does not consider herself an ethnographic filmmaker. 'My approach is basically poetic and spiritual,' she says. **Geoffrey Macnab**

VPRO TIGER AWARDS COMPETITION

Asshak, Tales from the Sahara

Ulrike Koch

Sat 24/1 17.45 Pathé 5; Sun 25/1 15.30 Pathé 4;
Tue 27/1 20.30 Cinerama 2; Sat 31/1 23.00 Cinerama 2

Sat. 24. Jan 2004

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