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## **A.B.C Africa**

**Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. 2001. N/R. 85mins. In English, Farsi and various African tongues, with subtitles. Documentary.**

**Y**ou want to do mankind a real service?" asks an extraterrestrial council of Woody Allen in *Stardust Memories*. "Tell funnier jokes." Iranian auteur Abbas Kiarostami isn't a comedian, of course, but he's far too talented a filmmaker to be wasting his time and energy on projects better suited to Sally Struthers. Shot on digital video, his latest documentary, designed to call attention to the plight of AIDS-stricken orphans in Uganda, features neither the thorny philosophical implications of *Close-Up* nor the witty insouciance of "Two Solutions to One Problem," to



**VICIOUS CIRCLE** Kiarostami's chronicle studies the extreme poverty that blights the African continent.

name two superior Kiarostami docs. Instead, he offers the same ethnographic tour and banal plea for compassion that any random PBS hack might have come

or three of the director's crew members sit outside at midnight, watching mosquitoes circling a light source. Suddenly, the electricity cuts off—apparently

up with, albeit with more shots of children grooving to African pop tunes and fewer heartrending close-ups of ominously buzzing flies. (He does get the flies in there, though.)

What makes this worthy but dull effort all the more frustrating is that smack-dab in the middle of it lies a single brief scene that serves as a reminder of what Kiarostami can accomplish when he's not playing humanitarian. Two

the custom in this tiny village. For perhaps five minutes, the screen goes entirely black (except for the occasional lit match) as the men attempt to find their way to their room in the dark, wondering aloud how anybody can live like this. The absence of an image and the unexpected extratextual digression give this sequence an extraordinary charge, even though nothing momentous happens; for a time, it looks as if the film might veer in a new and much less predictable direction. Alas, no: When the dawn breaks, the infomercial (mysteriously absent a toll-free number the viewer can call to help out) continues, complete with photos of forlorn African children superimposed on cloudscares. Good deed, bad movie. (Opens Fri; see Index for venues.)—Mike D'Angelo

**FILM**