Film

Filming Southern Africa

Recent events have thrust South Africa into world headlines. But news coverage has focused largely on black "unrest" and the white government's repressive response. The emphasis has been on "breaking news" while the long, complex history of apartheid and its daily impact on black South Africans is too often neglected. The Southern Africa Media Center attempts to complement the headlines and reach grassroots America through the unique medium of film.

As the arrests began at the South African embassy in Washington, D.C. last November, the Media Center was releasing three exceptional new films on black South African resistance to apartheid. In the week that followed, the Media Center mailed over 20,000 catalogues to activists across the U.S. so that these new resources could be effectively used in the ensuing anti-apartheid campaign.

The Southern Africa Media Center was created by California Newsreel in 1977 in the aftermath of the Soweto uprisings specifically to redress the media's incomplete portrayal of events in the region and to bring the voices of black South Africa to the American public. The Center brought together filmmakers, educators, religious leaders, and activists to develop innovative ways of using the films to inform and involve their communities in a grassroots debate over U.S. policy toward southern Africa.

A non-profit, tax-exempt corporation, the Center is guided by an advisory board composed of some of the most prominent American specialists and activists involved in the South African issue, including Harry Belafonte, Julian Bond, William Booth, Bishop H.H. Brookins, Ron Dellums, Miltred Fierce, George Hauser, Randall Robinson, the Rev. Dr. Kelly Miller Smith, James Turner, the Rev. Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, and David Wiley.

Today the Center is the most widely used source of films on southern Africa in the world. Past releases, such as Last Grave at Donbaza, Six Days in Soweto, Generations of Resistance, You Have Struck a Rock, South Africa Belongs to Us, The Discarded People, and Moving On, are often the first encounter students and ordinary citizens have with a critical and informed perspective on the region. There is hardly a university course or public event involving South Africa which does not feature one of the Center's releases.

During its seven years of operation, the Southern Africa Media Center has identified and developed an unique network of Americans committed to public education around southern African issues. Twenty-thousand black and African studies teachers, religious leaders, student organizations, public policy groups, and community organizers look to the Center for reliable media coverage on the region. Through this network of concerned individuals and organizations, close to 1 million Americans each year devote an hour or two of their
time to view and reflect upon a Southern Africa Media Center film.

Across the country, these highly motivated organizers—part of a grassroots “information network”—offer to their audiences an inexpensive and readily available alternative to the commercial media. This year the Center is using this network to “broadcast” its three new releases: Woza Albert!, Namibia: Africa’s Last Colony, and Allan Boesak: Choosing for Justice.

These films are unique in that each was specifically designed to allow black southern Africans to speak in their own voices to Western audiences. They offer the long overdue opportunity for Americans to “engage” not the white minority regime, but blacks speaking for and about themselves. Americans would have no opportunity to view these exceptional films if the Southern Africa Media Center had not imported them.

Woza Albert! is the unusual play written and performed by two black South Africans which has stunned audiences around the world. Now, thanks to this extraordinary BBC production, audiences across America can share—through their unique performances—the experience of what it means to be black in South Africa today.

The Center’s second new release, Namibia: Africa’s Last Colony, is the result of a remarkable British television series. The Third Eye, an innovative British television series, puts the BBC’s technical resources at the disposal of Third World activists, giving us the opportunity to see their countries through their own eyes. Our “eye” in Namibia: Africa’s Last Colony is Nora Chase, education director of the Namibian Council of Churches, who describes how her country has been exploited and terrorized by German, British, and now South African oppressors.

In Allan Boesak: Choosing for Justice, the Center’s third 1985 release, the Coloured South African minister explains how the message of liberty and brotherhood at the heart of the Christian tradition led him to devote his ministry to the abolition of apartheid. Boesak’s election to the presidency of the 70 million-member World Alliance of Reformed Churches shook the Afrikaner establishment to its foundations. In 1983, Boesak helped found the United Democratic Front, a multi-racial coalition advocating immediate majority rule in South Africa.

The recent upsurge of resistance in South Africa, and the increased media attention it has received, has broadened the audience for the Center’s films. The Media Center staff is busy consulting with national church and civic organizations which have committed themselves to public education around South Africa such as Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., A.M.E. Zion Church, National Black Law Student Association, National Medical Association, NAACP, U.S. Student Association, the Urban League, and others.

The Southern Africa Media Center releases provide a relatively easy but highly effective way for local chapters of these organizations to bring the issue of South Africa before their membership. We are also encouraging these groups to use the films to expand their outreach into the wider community—especially to such local opinion-makers as civic leaders, teachers, ministers, and newspaper reporters. These screenings can form the basis of a grassroots public policy debate which may perhaps lead to a people-to-people foreign policy between black South Africans and the American people.