Dear Mandela: A South African Film Finds an American Audience

Dara Kell, January 25, 2013

We look back at history because the past becomes a mirror, helping us to see our modern selves more clearly. In the same way, looking outside of our own country can help illuminate, challenge and re-frame. The documentary Dear Mandela, which I made in South Africa together with my husband and co-director Christopher Nizza, will air for American audiences on public television for the first time on Tuesday, January 29, 2013. It is part of the 2013 season of the documentary series AfroPoP: The Ultimate Cultural Exchange and will also stream for free during the month of February. The film follows young people resisting mass eviction from their homes in the shantytowns of Durban, South Africa. They are members of South Africa’s largest social movement of the poor, Abahlali baseMjondolo (Zulu for "Residents of the Shacks"). We filmed for four years as they took the government to the highest court in the country, won their case and got the dangerously regressive "Slums Act" scrapped from the books – saving thousands from eviction. Like so many South Africans in recent times, they have paid a heavy price for their defiance.

Dear Mandela has universal themes -- justice, dignity, courage, sacrifice. Still, without a direct link to the United States, we grappled with how to make it relevant for American audiences. How could we use the film to engage young audiences here in the United States, especially budding activists, and unite them with the shack dwellers in South Africa? More broadly, how could our film have an impact?

Key support for Dear Mandela came from the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Program. From the beginning, through three grants (Development, Production, and most recently, Audience Engagement) and two labs (the Film Composer & Documentary Lab and the Creative Producing Lab), they have stood behind the social justice goals of the film as much as they have nurtured its
content and craft. If you want the film to have an impact, they told us, first make
the story sing. At the Composer & Documentary Lab, advisor Todd Lending
urged us to “let the characters lead the story” and showed examples from his film
*Omar & Pete*. Cara Mertes and her team pushed us: deepen the emotion,
sharpen the scenes, clarify, cut. We restructured the film immediately and lopped
off an entire story arc. On a recent "Democracy Now" interview, Cara described
how the Institute is working to form “communities of documentary filmmakers”. At
the labs, this community operates at full throttle. We lived in a house with other
filmmakers, among them Ra’anan Alexandrowicz (*The Law In These Parts*, POV
2013), Rachel Libert and Tony Hardmon (*Semper Fi: Always Faithful*) and
Michèle Stephenson and Joe Brewster, whose epic *American Promise* (POV
2013) premiered at the Sundance Festival a few days ago. At the Creative
Producing Lab, we spend days talking with the advisors, including Jennifer
Arnold (*A Small Act*), about distribution and outreach: finding partners, crafting
impact strategies, marketing, budget. This community – and many others in New
York and South Africa – helped us chart a way forward.

*Dear Mandela* doesn’t have a distributor, which means that we have to
make sure it gets seen. In its first year of distribution, *Dear Mandela* has
screened in 31 countries, been translated into 8 languages and won multiple
awards including the Grand Jury Prize at the Brooklyn Film Festival, the Golden
Butterfly at Movies that Matter in The Hague and Best South African
Documentary at the Durban International Film Festival. It is available on satellite
television across Africa and in addition to our upcoming US broadcast on
AfroPoP, it will screen at festivals in Egypt, Finland and Australia in the coming
months.

Besides traditional venues for independent films like ours – festivals and
television – *Dear Mandela* has been able to cross over into community venues,
schools and churches with the help of ever-widening networks of activists,
lawyers and academics. Every few days, we receive an e-mail from someone,
somewhere, asking if they can host a screening. We mail them a DVD and ask
only that they take a few photographs. In South Africa, people have hosted their
own screenings in shantytowns and transit camps (the notorious, remote "temporary relocation areas" where evicted shack dwellers are dumped), housing conferences and high schools. We had a well-attended run (extended twice) at Johannesburg's trendy independent cinema The Bioscope. Abahlali members use the film extensively, showing clips when they are invited to speak abroad and using short versions to mobilize their members. Mnikelo says, “After we show the movie, everyone wants to be part of the march. They get more spirited, more encouraged.” We were approached by Christoph Haug, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. He wanted to organize a screening of the film but by the time he was finished, he had organized a two-week screening tour not only in Sweden but Germany as well, booked a sold-out German premiere at a cinema in Berlin and raised funds to bring two Abahlali members from South Africa to Europe for the tour.

Last October, the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights organized a weeklong tour of the film with earthquake survivors in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where one in five face eviction from their flimsy homes in sprawling, under-resourced tent camps. Two members of the Abahlali movement joined us from South Africa, and with a projector, a generator and a white sheet, we shared the new Creole version of Dear Mandela with residents. Local lawyers, camp leaders and activists joined us for post-screening discussions about leadership, building social movements and how to use the law to stop evictions. With the help of our recent audience engagement grant from the Sundance Institute, we’ll be extending this work to India, Brazil and Nigeria this year.

By the Fall of 2012, we felt that Dear Mandela was beginning to take on a life of its own in Europe and South Africa, but without A-list festivals under our belt, it was hard to find our audience here in the United States. We wanted to reach those who were feeling the effects of poverty, people living in communities with high rates of foreclosure and who were, like the young people in our film, organizing to change things. We enlisted the help of the Poverty Initiative, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) and two dozen grassroots organizations working to end poverty in the United States. We
planned an eight-city screening tour of *Dear Mandela*. Two founding members of the Abahlali movement, Mnikelo Nndabankulu (one of the ‘stars’ of the film) and Abahlali Youth League General Secretary Zodwa Nsibande -- both 28 years old -- trekked from Durban to New York. Over three days, in a wood-paneled room at Union Theological Seminary, we discussed *Dear Mandela* and South Africa’s Abahlali movement with 20 activists from the eight cities we would shortly visit, focusing on how American audiences view Africa and how the ideas we hoped to convey might be appropriately framed. We compared how race and class operate in South Africa and the United States, discussed the limits and possibilities of legal strategies versus political strategies, and planned a framework for how *Dear Mandela* could be used to support a growing human rights movement in the US. This Intensive -- and it lived up to its name -- prepared fertile ground for the work ahead.

We traveled to Boston, Burlington, Ithaca, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit and Chicago. Thirty days, thirty screenings. We traveled mostly by Greyhound bus. We slept on floors, couches and sometimes beds. We ate lots of bad road food and many good home-cooked meals made by kind hosts who welcomed three weary travelers into their homes and shared their lives and their work with us.

An army of volunteers in each city organized the screenings, booked theatres, churches, halls, museums and high schools, publicized the events, sold tickets, and arranged local panelists who could bring the issues of poverty and homelessness back home. Many screenings were sold out. In Philadelphia, Bryan Mercer of the Media Mobilizing Project introduced the film in this way: "Their fight in the informal settlements across South Africa is deeply connected to our fight in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the United States. The story that you will see and hear on film and in person tonight is a story of people who balance work, school, raising families, and organizing to bring together the poor. It is a story of inequality and injustice. But most importantly it is a story of dignity, humanity and the power of organizing."
Screenings where the films' stars are present are always, for me, the most meaningful. We have tried as much as possible to bring two or more Abahlali members to screenings. It is a sacrifice for the movement to send their leaders around the world, but having the courageous young people in the film speaking directly to audiences, answering their questions, creates a frisson, a magic that we – the boring old directors – cannot match. Mnikelo is especially charismatic and often has his audience in fits of laughter or close to tears. In every U.S. city we visited, young people asked how they could help the situation in South Africa. Mnikelo replied, "Don’t help Africa and ignore injustice at home." He quoted Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." One student wrote, “The most powerful moment in our class discussion was when they said that they made the trip to the United States to encourage our youth to become more politically involved. It was such a selfless statement that it caught me off guard.”

Post-screening conversations often turned to the challenge of organizing when people have to work several jobs to survive. Zodwa and Mnikelo spoke about how they have tried to address this in their movement by having all-night camps every month or so. From six o’ clock on Saturday evening until six o’ clock on Sunday morning, their members meet, free from strain of worrying about catching public transport, which is unavailable past 8 p.m. Children are taken care of and coffee flows freely. They air their fears, their grievances, their hopes and their ideas. They sing to keep their spirits up. Christopher and I filmed at one of the all-night camps while making Dear Mandela, and were impressed by the spirit of open dialogue – people can speak, uninterrupted, and everyone listens.

In the film, we see scenes of mass eviction. Demolition crews, nicknamed the Red Ants because of their red overalls, demolish shacks and leave families homeless – a violation of South Africa’s Constitution. Zafar Shah, an attorney at Baltimore’s Public Justice Center, said, “I would hate for people to leave this film screening saying, well, I don’t see slums and I don’t see the Red Ants in Baltimore City. I get the statistics every month from the sheriff. For 2012, we’re averaging 590 household evictions per month. That means we’re on pace to
have 71,000 warrants for eviction issued this year, where the police and sheriff go and take possession of the property. That’s 71,000 instances this year where a family is going to be pushed to the brink, facing the loss of everything they own, their sense of dignity.”

We heard about similarly devastating conditions in other cities and met many fighters who refuse to accept them. Men and women, young and old, whose tenacious spirit gives me hope – women like Maureen Taylor, who twenty years ago was taking over abandoned houses in Detroit with the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization. She hasn’t given up. At Occupy Detroit’s first anniversary birthday party she took the microphone after Mnikelo and said, “This young man that just talked, we just met him, and he’s talking the same way we’re talking – my goodness! Talking about, we ain’t tired and we don’t care. That’s certainly our message. So it’s just an absolute pleasure to have them both here at the time when we need more energy now than ever before.”

We spoke to high school students and college students studying law, politics, social work and journalism. We distributed DVDs of the film, spoke on radio shows and generated press in each city we visited. In Boston, we stood in the rain with the Hubbard family and their 18-month old baby as their home was foreclosed upon and impounded by the police and a swarm of guard dogs. We marched with Occupy Chicago and the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign as they launched their ‘Occupy Our Homes’ initiative. In Baltimore, Mnikelo and Zodwa chanted, “This is what democracy looks like” along with hotel workers protesting low wages at the Hyatt Regency. An elderly woman told us, “After 30 years working at the Hyatt, I had to mortgage my house to pay for hip surgery.” She urged the young crowd to organize, “from families to neighbors, from neighbors to communities.”

Towards the beginning of our tour, in the mobile home of Sandy Gaffney, a leader in Vermont Workers’ Center, Mnikelo noticed a painted sign. “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Mnikelo repeated this often throughout our tour, and Zodwa would add the African version: “Many spider webs can catch a lion. In Philadelphia, at a meeting of immigrants fighting
the unjust removal of their drivers’ licenses, someone said, “If we can unite our struggles, we can be invincible.” That is what I hope American audiences take away from the public television broadcast of *Dear Mandela*.

*Dear Mandela* premieres on PBS stations as part of the AfroPoP series on January 29, 2013 in New York (WNET), Los Angeles (KLCS) and Chicago (WYCC), and it will stream online for a limited time after that at blackpublicmedia.org. For broadcast times, visit [http://bit.ly/VhYUjR](http://bit.ly/VhYUjR) and click "where to watch." The directors will be chatting with viewers in a social screening Tuesday, January 29 at 4 p.m. ET at [http://bit.ly/14piOdm](http://bit.ly/14piOdm).

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