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08/13/2011

### DocuWeeks 2011's Three to See - "Better This World," "The Carrier," and "Unfinished Spaces"



While Angelenos such as myself have to wait a week for the start of [DocuWeeks](#), New Yorkers will get the first crack at seeing a selection of Oscar-aspiring documentaries beginning this weekend at the IFC Center in New York and continuing through September 1st. (In Los Angeles, films will play at the Laemmle Sunset 5 from August 19th-September 8th.) Over the three-week runs on both coasts, the International Documentary Association's lineup of films includes the Sundance favorites "[Being Elmo](#)" and "[Miss Representation](#)," war photographer Danfung Dennis' "[To Hell and Back Again](#)," and a surplus of health-related docs such as "[Dying to Do Letterman](#)," about one stand-up comedian's quest to appear on "The Late Show" after discovering he has cancer, and "[The Power of Two](#)," which follows twin sisters Ana and Isa Stenzel in their fight against cystic fibrosis.

Besides collecting the films all in one place, the event also brings out filmmakers to participate in post-screening Q & As, some of which I hope to cover in the weeks ahead. But for now, I can vouch for this trio of documentaries that are well worth your time if you're in the area.

**"Better This World" (New York: August 12th-18th, Los Angeles: August 26th-September 1st)**

Katie Galloway and Kelly Duane de la Vega's documentary is only slightly more frustrating to write about than it is to sit through, but that's because of the central twist in the incredible and infuriating story it chooses to tell. Made with the same lack of panache that one would find on your typical episode of "Frontline" (which as it happens is a part of Galloway's background), "Better This World" methodically unfolds the case of David McKay and Bradley Crowder, two college-aged kids from Midland, Texas whose trip to protest the Republican National Convention in 2008 resulted in their arrests with considerable charges leveled against them once they were considered domestic terrorists by the FBI and Homeland Security.

Explaining how the two wind up in such dire straits would spoil the gut punch Galloway and Duane de la Vega deliver in the second act, but without missing a beat, the film transforms from a dry account of two activists at the wrong place and wrong time into a wrenching look at how they were railroaded by the system on a personal level and the unforgiving and quite possibly unethical nature of how America goes about enforcing its terrorism policy. If anything, "Better This World" presents government practices more infuriating than anything McKay and Crowder were protesting in the first place. If you can't make it out for DocuWeeks, the film will soon premiere on [PBS' POV series](#) on September 6th and made available for the month after online here, but it's nonetheless a documentary built for the big screen.

**"The Carrier" (New York: August 19th-25th, Los Angeles: August 26th-September 1st)**

I caught "The Carrier" at the Tribeca Film Festival, where I [reviewed](#) it for IFC.com, but here's an excerpt:

If you were to watch "The Carrier" without subtitles, there are many points at which you'd suspect nothing is wrong and perhaps that's the saddest statement the film makes of all. A documentary about the life of a polygamous family in Zambia where the beauty of the landscape is diametrically opposed with the tragic spread of HIV between the members of the Mweeba clan, Maggie Betts' film often features its subjects as expressionless when discussing contraction of the disease as though it's an accepted part of life in their community, a feeling that emerges not out of a lack of care, but years of defeat.

For the family's patriarch Abarcon, it's a minor inconvenience, a price he pays for sleeping around with multiple partners both within and outside of his marriage, but for his three wives Brenda, Matildah and Mutinta, it's tantamount to a death sentence well before they're felled by the ultimately fatal symptoms of HIV as they live in constant fear of succumbing to AIDS or passing it onto their children. While the film only chronicles what appears to be a few months in their lives, it's obviously emblematic of a cycle that was firmly established generations before and that the marginalization of women will only continue unless they start to challenge their place in society, a realization that comes to Mutinta when she discovers she's carrying the latest of Abarcon's many, many children.

Even without knowing anything about the making of "The Carrier," it wouldn't take long to guess that Betts was involved as an AIDS activist before she got into filmmaking, a fact that while being sussed out by a little research is evident from the film's strident portrayal of Mutinta's gradual empowerment after she entered into a marriage with Abarcon without knowing of his other wives and likewise, Abarcon's nonchalance about the way he's infected the lives of others in both the literal and figurative sense. (It's actually the cast



Abarcon, a handsome if not particularly charming or imposing man dressed in breezy shirts with David Beckham and Guess logos, that's one of the film's main points of interest, as he can't easily be demonized.) Yet even if it seems at times that the weight of Betts' passion is focused more on making a point than telling a story, the one she finds in the small village of Monze is too powerful to be denied.

### **"Unfinished Spaces" (New York: August 12th-18th, Los Angeles: August 19th-25th)**

Since post-Revolution Cuba remains as such an enigma for those that live outside its borders, Alys Nahmias and Benjamin Murray's film about the country's extensive commitment to its artistic community in the 1960s is an entirely fresh and unexpected perspective on history. The documentary is first a portrait of the three architects charged with creating an idyllic campus for artists on a former golf course — Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garratti, and Roberto Gottardi — that would house five separate schools for the arts, allowing sculptors, painters, dancers and musicians to freely work on their craft. However, through their stories, "Unfinished Spaces" speaks to a much larger narrative of the idealism that led to the spread of communism in Cuba as the schools were envisioned as a haven that would represent the best of the nation's creativity. Ultimately, it ended up in shambles, parallel to the downfall of the Iron Curtain, which not so coincidentally hastened the art schools' fall into disrepair as it was a decree that "non-productive architecture" be stopped that led to the unwillingness to maintain them.

Seeing Fidel Castro tearfully argue on behalf of the schools is stunning enough, but Nahmias and Murray's decade-long chronicle of the architects' return to the schools to perhaps restore them to their original glory is extraordinary, efficiently using what must have been limited resources to demonstrate just what a rich history the country lost in their absence when support for the project dried up and the ongoing international effort to once again improve the schools. While the style of the film is rather conservative, the time it portrays is not, with the film's digressions about the conspiring sexual revolution and the beautiful artwork of the era always around to pump up the intrigue if the film's political aspects are of less interest or vice-versa. "Unfinished Spaces" has yet to find a distributor, so its DocuWeeks run is your best chance to see it and an opportunity that really shouldn't be missed. A full schedule is [here](#).

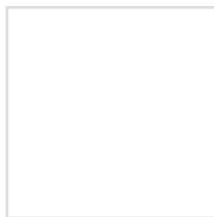
*The full DocuWeeks lineup can be found [here](#).*

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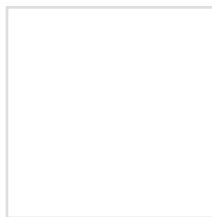


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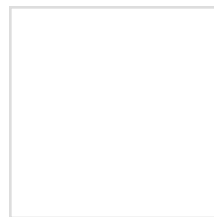
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