

B.C. filmmakers travel the globe for untold stories

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Doc-maker Julia Ivanova spent three summers in the Ukraine to make *Family Portrait in Black and White*, about a woman named Olga Nenyra who is raising nearly two dozen mixed-race children in a small Ukrainian town. The VIFF screenings (6 p.m. Saturday, 11:30 a.m. Monday, both Granville 7) are the film's hometown debut.

Photograph by: Submitted, File

The directors are from B.C., but their curiosity takes them all over the world.

In three documentaries screening at this year's Vancouver International Film Festival, a trio of directors turned their cameras on: Chinese environmentalists and farmers battling a dam project; a Ukrainian foster mother raising a brood of biracial children; and Arab millionaires trafficking in Asian children to run a brutal camel race.

The globe-trotting trend has picked up among B.C. filmmakers over the past 10 years.

"Some people wanted us to just point the cameras at the ground, stay inside Canada and we said that's ridiculous," says Gary Marcuse, who was head of the Documentary Organization of Canada a decade ago when filmmakers worked to change how Canadian documentaries were defined and funded.

Marcuse himself just finished three years work on *Waking the Green Tiger* (9:30 p.m. Friday, 12:30 p.m. Oct. 11, both Granville 7), his chronicle of the battle to save three river valleys in China from massive, multi-dam hydro projects. He ended up getting a crash course in Chinese environmentalism going back to the era of Mao.

The resulting documentary (a shorter version will air this year on CBC's *The Nature of Things*) led

Marcuse to the work of activist filmmaker Shi Lihong, who documented the hardships faced by villages along another river valley that was dammed 20 years ago.

Thanks to cheap digital copies, Shi Long's film became a must-see among those who lived along the newly threatened valleys, and ultimately led to the Chinese government cutting back on future hydro development plans.

"It tells you something about the power of film," says Marcuse, whose own past work includes the cautionary tale *Nuclear Dynamite*. "Shi Lihong became a great friend and an extraordinary collaborator."

Marcuse also found archival footage of Chairman Mao's ill-considered battle against nature, which included mobilizing the rural populace to exterminate the country's sparrows in the 1950s, resulting in an over-abundance of locusts that ate the grain harvest and caused a famine. Also part of Mao's plan was stripping the country's forests to fuel small steel mills and draining lakes to make more farmland. None of the plans went well, but nobody argued with Mao.

"It was the worst of all the western approaches to nature, collapsed into 20 years," says Marcuse.

He got considerable interview time with a now-retired Chinese environment official whose time as a government insider went back to the Mao years, and who laid the groundwork on the inside, crafting laws that eventually empowered the present-day villagers and activists to at least slow the hydro projects in their backyards.

There's an optimism to Marcuse's movie, with the hope that the grassroots approach to environmental battles might spread to other areas of Chinese life and politics.

Doc-maker Julia Ivanova spent three summers in the Ukraine to make *Family Portrait in Black and White*, about a woman named Olga NENYA who is raising nearly two dozen mixed-race children in a small Ukrainian town. The film earlier won best documentary at Toronto's Hot Docs festival and was chosen to screen at last January's Sundance Film Festival. The VIFF screenings (6 p.m. Saturday, 11:30 a.m. Monday, both Granville 7) are the film's hometown debut.

The adopted Ukrainian children are the offspring of visiting African students and Ukrainian mothers, abandoned in the face of the country's endemic racism. The woman at the centre of this domestic chaos is no saint, she's a complex mix of idealism and favouritism.

"All films I've ever seen about foster mothers, we have the figure of Mother Teresa in the centre," says Ivanova, who was born in Russia and studied film in Moscow. She and her family, including her parents and brother, her husband and their daughter, immigrated to Canada in 1995.

Vancouver's Vic Sarin went to the United Arab Emirates, Bangladesh and Mauritania to track the story of pre-teen children handed over by their parents to human traffickers, who ultimately delivered them into virtual slavery, as the tiny jockeys in well-funded camel races watched by the UAE's richest men. His movie *Desert Riders* screened during VIFF's opening weekend, and gets an airing on the Discovery Channel next year.

International pressure has recently curbed the dangerous camel races that left children injured and killed, and children have been returned to their home countries, but Sarin wonders how the traffic in young children went on for two decades.

“I wanted to take a look at these kids, where they are today. Where were the parents, where were the governments,” Sarin says. “I wanted to give everyone a platform.”

Sarin, who himself came to Canada from India in the 1960s, sees the Canadian global view in documentaries as part of a larger national outward-looking trait.

“We are sitting in a five-star hotel (in Canada). We are comfortable, we have time and resources to do something, and the fact that we care tells you a lot about us.”

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