



Spout Blog

LAFF: Sex and Place

By Karina Longworth on June 30, 2008 at 11:00 am

Sarah Friedland and Esy Casey's *Thing With No Name* follows two women in sub-Saharan African villages as they controversially begin a program of anti-retroviral drugs after having been diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. Undeniably beautiful to look at and powerfully poetic in its depiction of a community of women stricken with poverty and sick with a virus that they don't fully understand, the film ironically and sadly fails at its propagandist mission when tragedies of timing and fate intervene.

Based on stakes that are literally life-or-death, *Thing With No Name* immediately engrosses by dropping us straight into a land that had just begun to recover from the racial struggles of the 20th century ("Things improved," says one of the few men seen on screen. "The police stopped arresting and beating up black people.") when HIV/AIDS started to ravage the community. We're taken into two rural Zulu villages, each populated by a few extended families worth of women. Husbands, brothers and fathers are either at work in Johannesburg, where they contract the virus and bring it home, or they've already been eliminated by sickness or crime. There's no electricity--women sleep on mats on the floor and take their drug cocktails by candlelight--and only a handful of medical clinics to serve a wider community of a hundred thousand people.

The crush of people fighting for these limited medical resources are one reason why neither of the film's subjects, Ntombeleni and

Danisile, are aware that they've contracted the HIV virus until they've become sick enough to be diagnosed with full-blown AIDS; another factor is the reluctance to directly address the epidemic in the community. The virus that's systematically decimating the population is as likely to be referred to by its clinical name as by a variety of sadly poetic referents, including "Decimator of the Nation." Women educate one another through singing traditional tribal songs that name drop the names of AIDS drugs ("We saw Stocrin/ We saw Stavir 50_) like rappers reel off brands of bling. Not entirely confident that the mysterious cocktails of pills are working in the longterm when they seem to do little but induce dementia in the short term, local nurses drum up home remedies to salve individual maladies to combat specific pains.

The film, which tracks the progress of both women over the course of several summer months, moves slowly, and that seems fitting. These patients are essentially playing a waiting game--waiting for information, waiting for care, waiting to see how the drugs will affect them, and inevitably waiting to die. As an aid worker puts it in the film, it's impractical to look at the current state of the epidemic as a fight against death; instead, they're "fighting the inhumanity of silence." But the pacing is a major reason why the tension of this place with no electricity but fledgling access to high-tech miracle drugs pops off the screen. There's an inherent sadness to a portrait of a place where education has to focus on reacting to infection rather than preventing it, because the sanctity of these women's sexual lives--due to a combination of rampant rape and their husbands' cultural indifference to sexual fidelity--are completely out of their own control. With its painterly images fields on fire and patient portraits of faces in quiet pain, the film itself harnesses that tension, and joins the fight as a teaching tool played in the key of fine art.