

Cannes 2009: Another side of the festival

When people think of the Festival du Film at Cannes, they think of fun in the sun, of scenes like the sustained applause that greeted Pixar's exceptional "Up" when it was shown to the world's press on Wednesday morning. But Cannes also has another side, a passion for politically engaged documentaries - remember, this is where Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11" won the Palme d'Or - and that is the side reflected in Anne Aghion's quietly devastating "My Neighbor My Killer."

Screening out of competition on Thursday, "My Neighbor My Killer" is a result of the nearly ten years filmmaker Aghion spent on and off in the tiny Rwandan hamlet of Gafumba, investigating not only the Rwandan genocide but what happened afterwards. For in 2001, the Rwandan government announced a series of Gacaca Tribunals, the creation of community courts in which people who committed the awful killings of neighbors would come face to face with the survivors in the name of eventual national reconciliation.

The most striking thing about "My Neighbor My Killer" is the way it reveals that nothing about this process was simple or went exactly the way anyone anticipated. The stories were so awful, it was an open question whether any kind of reconciliation was possible, and because this was a quintessentially human process it had its own rhythms and its own results. Filmmaker Aghion was there for all the key moments, patiently letting people talk. "These whites ask the strangest questions," one of the survivors is heard to say, and the answers that resulted are remarkable. -- Kenneth Turan

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