

LOCAL DOCUMENTARY WINS AUDIENCE AWARD IN ITALY by Karen van Schalkwyk

Doing it!, is a documentary that profiles the life of four young South African women from radically diverse backgrounds who have grown up under difficult circumstances. Kali van der Merwe, who wrote and directed the documentary says that the film deals with their first sexual experiences and issues in their lives. “Antoinette Fouche, Linda Sambata, Zandi Zwane and Shameema Williams talk openly and uninhibitedly about their passion as well as their pain. Childhood sexuality, abuse, lesbianism, self esteem, femininity, being HIV positive, betrayal and religion are discussed with great courage and awareness in the film.”

Van der Merwe was invited to attend and present the documentary at the International Film Festival “Cinema delle Donne” in Turin, Italy in March 2003. At the festival the audience voted, Doing it!, the best documentary and it received the premio del pubblico.

“The festival profiles the work of women directors and was started over 10 years ago. Doing it! was part of the international documentary competition section. I also had the opportunity to meet women directors from all over the world.”

The documentary received its “funding from a proposal I wrote and submitted through an organisation called Women’s Media Watch to the National Film and Video Foundation in 1999 (then still DACST’s). This was the first bit of funding that kick started the whole process.” However, Van der Merwe explains, “it took another two years to raise the rest of the finance to complete the documentary.”

The largest percentage of the funding came from the Open Society Foundation for South Africa, who at the time had a brief to support video production. Other money came from National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW) and the City of Cape Town. “The funders saw the documentary as a valid intervention to raise awareness about sexual issues amongst youth, “ van der Merwe says.

Van der Merwe explains: “The inspiration for the documentary came from another documentary called, Who’s News, that I co-directed for Women’s Media Watch. Women’s Media Watch is a membership based group that work towards ending sexism, classism, homophobia and racism in the media.”

She says in Who's News, "women criticise the way they are represented in the media. This brought to my attention how young women were particularly dissatisfied with the way they are being portrayed and expressed it with such vitality and vigour. They hated being patronised, they felt it was babes and stars that got all the attention and the ordinary girl didn't feature. There was also pressure to conform. Doing It!, was made with all these issues in mind."

The other vital issue in the documentary is violence against women. "I felt I wanted to make something that would pay tribute to young women in this country who grow up with extreme forms of violence being perpetrated against them. I wanted to show how these women face adversity with bravery and creativity, turning things round for themselves."

Van der Merwe explains that in South Africa sexuality is an under-explored topic in the media. "This documentary aims to present it openly, honestly and in a way that is gender sensitive without dictating any solutions or being didactic." HIV/AIDS is also explored in the film. "This one of the biggest challenges facing youth of today and unless the myths, stereotypes, misinformation and culture of silence is broken we are going to continually see the alarming transfer rates of the virus."

Making the documentary involved training of young women in filmmaking skills in order to empower those involved in the process. Van der Merwe explains: "As part of the documentary the young women received training in camera and interview skills. They then went out as crew into different communities in the Western Cape interviewing and filming youth talking about topics that were close to their hearts and lives." Van der Merwe elaborates that these pieces of footage have been used to create montages, "which adds some fun and works in demystifying the media making process."

Doing it! will be broadcast on SABC 1 in August around National Women's Day.