

DOC TALK

Doc Talk: Documentaries rule at the Newburyport and Camden film festivals

By Peter Keough Globe Correspondent, September 11, 2019, 8:15 p.m.



“Kifaru” screens at the Camden International Film Festival.

Indicative of the robust health of the nonfiction film genre, two outstanding documentary film festivals — the **Newburyport Documentary Film Festival** (Sept. 13-15) and the Camden International Film Festival (Sept. 12-15), in Maine — are taking place this weekend.

It’s a 40-minute drive from Boston to the quaint town of Newburyport, in itself an appealing place for a weekend getaway, with its rich history (founded in 1635) and

proximity to Plum Island. Now in its 14th season, the festival offers a lineup of 25 features and shorts, with almost all filmmakers attending Q&As.

Bestor Cram and Mike Majoros's "**The Last American Colony**" (Sept. 15, 11:45 a.m., Firehouse Center for the Arts,) opens with clips of President Trump in Puerto Rico tossing rolls of paper towels to survivors of Hurricane Maria in 2018 and of him making fun of the Spanish pronunciation of the island's name. These presidential lowlights as much as the disaster itself are reminders of the unusual status of the inhabitants of this "unincorporated territory": They are quasi-citizens, who have no representation in Congress and cannot vote for president . In effect, argues the film, they are subjects of an imperial power.

The film examines this situation from the point of view of Puerto Rican revolutionary Juan Segarra. A product of Phillips Academy, in Andover, and Harvard, he decided to fight for the independence of his people. Segarra helped found the pro-independence group Los Macheteros (the Cane Cutters), whose activities between the late '70s and early '80s included a multi-million-dollar Welles Fargo heist in Connecticut and the destruction of US military planes in San Juan. Hunted down by the FBI, he was captured, sentenced to 55 years in prison, and, in 1999, pardoned by President Clinton.

Interviewed by Cram and Majoros, Segarra today is sardonic and affable and an advocate of peaceful change. In one revealing scene, he attends his Phillips Andover 50th reunion — a former armed revolutionary schmoozing with classmates who pursued careers as lawyers and financiers.

You don't have to go to Puerto Rico to find obstruction of democratic principles, as seen in Michael Kasino's "**Rigged: The Voter Suppression Playbook**" (Sept. 15, 10 a.m., Newburyport Screening Room). It examines in a series of 10 chapters the Republican strategy to undermine the electoral process and ensure their hegemony,

beginning in 2008 and culminating in 2016 with the election of Donald Trump.

Among the tactics employed are gerrymandering and voter suppression. Outlining the process with concision and clarity, the film lends credence to its argument by interviewing former Republican strategists who have put patriotism over party.

Not all films in the festival involve politics. Jeanie Bryson's "**Sing You a Brand New Song: The Words and Music of Coleman Mellett**" (Sept. 15, 5:15 p.m., Firehouse Center for the Arts) tells a heartbreaking story of a personal tragedy that was also a sad loss for the music world.

In 2009, 34-year-old Coleman Mellett, a guitarist for Chuck Mangione and a rising star, died in a plane crash en route to a concert. He left behind unfinished tracks for a debut album. Bryson, Mellett's widow, shows how friends and colleagues undertook the challenge of transforming the unfinished material into the fulfillment of Mellett's dream. His music is joyous and subtle — as one interviewee puts it, a combination of James Taylor (who's seen in the studio helping to record one of the numbers) and Carole King — and inspired by his love for his wife.

Farther north, a 3½-hour drive from Boston, the Camden International Film Festival, now celebrating its 15th edition, boasts 38 features, 51 short films, and 17 virtual-reality and immersive experiences from more than 35 countries.

Many of the films investigate the plight of those victimized by greed, inhumanity, and the despoliation of the environment. Some of these victims are perceptible only to a gifted few. Or so argues an unusual look at the environmental movement in Iceland, Sara Dosa's "**The Seer and the Unseen**" (Sept. 15, 3 p.m., Strand Theatre, Rockland, Maine; a Q&A with the filmmaker follows the screening). Ragga Jónsdóttir, a sweet-natured grandmother, can see and communicate with the invisible beings — elves, dwarfs, sprites, and trolls — who, according to Icelandic folklore and widespread

belief, inhabit the spectacular volcanic landscape.

A crisis arises when a proposed highway threatens to destroy part of a natural preserve where these creatures dwell. In a sequence demonstrating one difference between Iceland and the United States, a crew with a giant crane laboriously moves out of the way of the construction a monolithic boulder that Jónsdóttir claims to be an “Elf chapel.”

In David Hambridge’s intimate and affecting “**Kifaru**” (Sept 15, 7:30 p.m., Camden Opera House) another legendary species, but this one flesh and blood, faces extinction, despite the dedicated efforts of the staff at a Kenyan nature preserve.

Sudan, the last male northern white rhinoceros in the world, died of old age in 2018, at 45, a passage widely covered in the international news media. Hambridge shares the final months of Sudan’s life and also looks at the lives of his hard-working caretakers who spend most of the year away from their families to lovingly tend to Sudan and the species’ two remaining females. It’s a job that, as one of them comments, doesn’t pay much and earns little respect in Kenya.

Poachers have been responsible for the near-extinction. Rhino horns are worth their weight in gold to dealers, and for people who earn a dollar a day it’s a temptation hard to resist. The film ends on both a note of hope, as scientists plan to use genetic material from Sudan to resurrect the species, and a note of dismay, as China lifts its ban on the importation of rhinoceros horns.

Go to www.nbptdocufest.org and pointsnorthinstitute.org/ciff/.

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