

THE VANCOUVER SUN



MOVIE GUIDE

Making complicated issues Sesame Street simple

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JUNE 10, 2009 BE THE FIRST TO POST A COMMENT

Sesame Street goes to Rwanda, where the scars of the 1994 genocide that killed almost a million people are still so raw? Or to Darfur, where a murderous spree that has killed as many as 400,000 is still under way?

As hard as this is to imagine, that image -- a kind of Sesame Street for adults shot in some of the oddest, and some of the grittiest, places on earth -- is what filmmaker and philanthropist Charles Annenberg Weingarten comes up with when I ask him to describe his work.

"What I mean is, we take complicated issues in the world and simplify them so they are user-friendly," he told me in an interview in advance of the screening of a handful of his 200-odd short films here on Thursday.

Weingarten is the grandson of Walter Annenberg, the originator of TV Guide and an author and diplomat who founded and richly endowed a family foundation that bears his name. Four years ago, the 42-year-old filmmaker set up Explore, a division of the foundation, as a vehicle for him to pursue his interest in overcoming suspicion and fear through understanding the human condition.

Explore consumes only about a tenth of the foundation's budget -- but that budget is huge, with about \$1.2 billion in grants distributed to non-profits in the U.S. and worldwide. So a modest percentage is plenty to let Weingarten pursue his passions. And his passions take him everywhere.

"Africa was our first trip. The world portrays it as the world's great pity party. You have AIDS, war, famine, disease and a few cute animals sprinkled on top. But, really, when you go to Africa and you see it, it has amazing people, a rich cultural heritage, and they're doing amazing work.

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"Then China, which was our second trip. China is portrayed as the world's next great superpower, and we should be afraid. All doom and gloom. We see a lot of fear about this country. But when you go there, and you look under the hood, you'll discover that there are a lot of unique minds doing good work.

"Then the Middle East. I started with a trilogy of books. Before I went I studied the Old Testament, the New, and the Koran. I travelled as a Muslim, a Catholic, a Jew. And, really, my hope on that trip was to showcase that behind the veil of religion - which is used sometimes as a weapon -- there is, once again, really good people doing really good work. So the ultimate goal is to replace fear with trust."

There are also projects closer to home that are focused on issues rather than on geography. Aging in America. The re-integration of soldiers when they come home from difficult parts of the world. The juxtaposition of Mexican poverty and American wealth along the border. The value of pets.

And then there's B.C. - "one of the pearls of the planet." On a previous trip here, "We did some first nations projects. We did some whale researchers, and a museum or two."

And now Weingarten and his crew are "doing" our former mayor, Sam Sullivan. But even here, his interests are eclectic. On one hand, he is interested in (and helping to fund) the experimental work the city is doing with drug addicts, and on the other he and his crew will focus on the societies for the disabled -- the wheelchair hiking and puff-and-sip sailing -- that Sullivan has founded. "Sam really caught my attention" on an earlier trip, he said. "He represents one of the things that really defines Explore. It's to find truly unique individuals who have a deep sense of conviction to try to improve the planet, and to share their stories."

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But Weingarten is coming to Vancouver to show films, not just to make them. A screening presented by Vancouver International Film Festival on Thursday evening will open with four of Weingarten's short films -- an examination of spiritual India, a look at the life of an Ethiopian woman who cares for 5,000 orphans, an exploration of strife in the Middle East, and a look at Orca Guardians, which was shot off the coast of B.C. Weingarten will be on hand to discuss these films with the audience and invited guests,

The evening will end with the "avant-premiere" of director Eric Metzger's Reporter, which is billed as "a tremendously compelling new documentary about Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter/columnist Nicholas Kristof" at work in the Congo.

The screening begins at 7 p.m. at Vancity Theatre on Seymour Street.