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TIFF Review: A Promise to the Dead: The Exile Journey of Ariel Dorfman

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One of the biggest challenges that faces a documentary filmmaker is balancing the pursuit of passion and emotion with the quest to inform. To dig too deep in one leaves the possibility of short-changing the other. With fiction, they can be created together so that both thrive. With a documentary, however, there isn't that luxury. For [Peter Raymont's](#) latest film, [A Promise to the Dead: The Exile Journey of Ariel Dorfman](#), one excels at the expense of the other. But that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Promise unfolds the life of writer and activist Ariel Dorfman, and how it intertwines with Augusto Pinochet's 1973 Chilean coup against then-president Salvador Allende. At the time, Dorfman was a Cultural Adviser and should have been called to the capitol building when it was under attack -- but he later learned his name was crossed off the list so that he'd survive to tell the story. And it is an incredible account -- one that discusses not only the life of a man in exile, but the drive of passion.

At its core, the documentary is the story of Dorfman's struggle to define his home, and how his life is intertwined with the events of September 11, 1973 -- a date that was to once again haunt him in an eerily similar manner many years later. Raymont brings us into the writer's world, teaching of us about Dorfman's political and intellectual bloodline, as well as the horrors that befell the country when Pinochet gained control. The documentary excels at telling the story -- both through Ariel's peaceful eloquence and relaying enough information to give viewers an understanding of the man and the context, without getting bogged down in details.

On the flip side, however, is a lack of continuing passion. *Promise* is a bright, crisp and smooth documentary that feels planned and executed -- this helps tell the story, but it *is* at the expense of absorbing the audience in the emotion of the experience. There are scenes where Raymont starts to tap into the real moments -- particularly when Dorfman marches down a path with old friends, chanting as they did three decades ago. As the three march, you can feel the strength of their conviction, and feel as though you right there with them. However, scenes like this are just brief moments in a whole that relies on information, eloquence and a serious, but light, tone. This isn't to say that you don't feel for his story and his life. You do. It just isn't in that way that envelopes you.

Dorfman's memories are what tug on your emotion, not the filmmaking. Yet that's okay, because you come out informed and moved -- you understand Dorfman's experience, the coup and also the lives of those who were not exiled. Raymont does a wonderful job of putting the story together and filming the personality of Dorfman -- his peaceful manner, passion and intelligence. While I would have loved to see more of the personal moments, I'm not sure that I would want to lose anything to make it fit. Maybe that's for another time. *A Promise to the Dead* will make you feel, and think, and learn, but most of all, it will leave you with the power of Dorfman's conviction -- passion without violence.

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