



Ariel Dorfman keeps 'A Promise to the Dead'



Ariel Dorfman and director Peter Raymont

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"A Promise to the Dead" is an emotional journey through the volatile landscape of a country torn apart by political ideologies, as seen through the eyes of a man whose own experience was at the heart of Chile's bloody political power struggle in the 1970s.

The documentary film will premiere Saturday night at the Toronto International Film Festival. Directed by Canadian filmmaker Peter Raymont, it tells the story of Ariel Dorfman, a celebrated playwright, poet, academic and writer.

Born in Argentina, but raised in New York until his family was exiled to Chile during the Red Scare, Dorfman rose to the position of cultural attache to Salvador Allende, the country's socialist president.

When that government was brought down on Sept. 11, 1973 by an infamous military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet, Dorfman was one of just a few from Allende's inner circle to survive the ensuing bloodshed.

Based largely on his memoir "Heading South, Looking North," the film follows Dorfman's journey back to Chile to confront the ghosts of his past and make good on the belief that his life was spared because someone had to tell the story.

Dorfman, a professor at Duke University since 1985, lives in Durham, North Carolina with his family.

His works, written in Spanish and English and translated into 30 languages, include:

- How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic
- The Last Song of Manuel Sendero
- Exorcising Terror: The Incredible Unending Trial of Augusto Pinochet
- Death and the Maiden, a play that was later turned into a film directed by Roman Polanski

The trip to Chile coincided with Pinochet's death last year and served as a personal journey of reconciliation for Dorfman, who saw many of his friends murdered by Pinochet's regime and was forced to flee for his own life.

"How do you not become your enemy? That is perhaps the central question of our time," Dorfman tells CTV.ca, describing the goal of the film.

"If George Bush had asked himself that question we would not be in Iraq, and many people would not be dead. This is not an anti-George Bush film, but it's about entering the ambiguity of confronting the horrors that are done to you, and how you come out of them more human and not less human, more ardent about seeking justice and compassion, and not seeking revenge."

But even during his plight -- hiding out for weeks with other political targets, hearing news about the deaths of his friends, separated from his wife and child -- in the back of his mind Dorfman often thought that the story would make a fascinating film, he says.

The New York World Trade Center bombings of 9/11 -- another horrific Sept. 11th that hearkened back to Pinochet's coup -- and the aftermath, triggered something inside of Dorfman.

Dorfman became frustrated by his belief that the terrorist attacks didn't lead America to "meditate creatively upon history and violence, to figure out a way to imagine a world where such devastation could no longer be conceivable," but instead led to an invasion and quest for revenge.

"All of which heightened my sense that there might be some value in exploring again a possible film based on my life, on what I had learned and the people of Chile had learned from the sorrows of intolerance and the bleakness of tyranny, how we had grown from our ashes, how we had dealt with our pain and overcome the legacy of terror," he says in a statement about the film.

Meeting the director

Dorfman had written his bestselling memoir, "Heading North, Looking South," in 1999. But it wasn't until he met Raymont, who directed "Shake Hands With The Devil", a documentary about General Romeo Dallaire, in 2005, that he felt he had encountered a filmmaker who could convey the story.

Raymont had been a fan of Dorfman's poems and plays for years, and much of his own previous work has focused on Nicaragua. As a result he felt as though he has been preparing to tell Dorfman's story, without realizing it, for years, he tells CTV.ca.

Raymont, who experienced his own loss in 2006 when his wife, Lindalee Tracey, succumbed to cancer just weeks before the trip to Chile with Dorfman, said his personal heartache made it difficult to work, but also prepared him to tell the tale of loss.

"This was a very hard film to make," Raymont tells CTV.ca, recounting his loss and the tough decision to travel to Chile.

"She was my filmmaking companion in many ways, and I wasn't in the right frame of mind to go off and shoot a film, but Ariel was going anyway...I just wasn't psychologically up for it so it was very hard to do, and yet I'm very glad I did. It was my own promise to the dead, if you like."

He felt the story was worth telling, not just because of his appreciation for Dorfman, but because there are lessons that can be learned from the struggle by Chile's exiled community to bring about democracy, to free

political prisoners and raise awareness about Pinochet's rule from outside the nation's borders.

Democracy was finally restored to Chile in 1990.

"I really do feel we are all our brothers' keeper, and if there's injustice in their world there's injustice in our world," Raymont says.

Dorfman said the two have developed a strong friendship through the emotional internal battles they both waged during the making of the film. He said Raymont's loss heading into the project, in a way, helped him to understand the depth of Dorfman's own sorrow, and began the healing process.

"I've always been a great believer in the idea you don't get over pain you get through it, you absorb it and then you live with it, and one of the ways you do that, for artists, is you keep on working."

He said Raymont was close enough to his own grief, sufficiently fascinated in Dorfman's and Chile's dilemmas, "yet distant enough from the horror so that he could act as a calm bridge for so many of our contemporaries who are in dire need of understanding this sort of story."

Dorfman's own goal for the film was also to serve as a bridge between cultures and across languages and follow through on a longstanding promise to tell the story of those who didn't survive the coup.

He tells CTV.ca he believes he has finally met the challenge.

"I've done it. I don't know how well I've done it, or even if it's possible, finally, but I've tried, I've done it, I've told that story, including things that are forbidden to tell."

After its debut at the Toronto International Film Festival, the film will be joining the International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam, and has been short listed by the International Documentary Association for showings across the U.S., which will make it eligible for an Academy Award.

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