

Review

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Pray the Devil Back To Hell. Gini Reticker and Abigail Disney. Fork Films – USA

It's not often that I watch a documentary film, and immediately sign up to become a fan on the social networking website, My Face. But this remarkable film directed by Gini Reticker and produced by Abigail Disney had that effect on me. I may have worked in British television for over twenty years, yet never have I seen a documentary made and produced by Americans about Africa, which gives voice so eloquently to women peace activists on the continent.

Pray the Devil Back to Hell tells a riveting, prescient story very well indeed. With high production values and a brilliant title sequence, the film begins and ends with a rousing invocation of West Africa sung by Beninese diva, Angelique Kidjo.

The real stars, however, are Liberian women peace activists: Leymah Gbowee, Asatu Bah Kenneth, Vaiba Flomo, Janet Bryant-Johnson, Ety Weah and Etweda "Sugars" Cooper, who after years of civil war and mayhem, came together to form a pressure group. Conceived initially as a Christian women's campaign, the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace transformed an alliance between Christian and Moslem women into a movement to force Charles Taylor, the President of Liberia at the time, and rebel warlords in LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) to attend peace talks in Ghana in June 2003.

The film's reconstruction of how the peace movement was created, and then pressurised Taylor and warlords to negotiate an end to Liberia's protracted civil war, is spell-binding. Thanks to a charismatic cast of articulate contributors, and Gini Reticker's superb grasp of dramatic pacing, we follow, on tenterhooks, the women's journey towards peace. And what a journey it is!

Past events are pieced together primarily through the testimonies of the women concerned. However, archival material - in the form of film and video footage, newspaper cuttings, photographs, and radio broadcasts - is used to brilliant effect. Hence, in watching the documentary, we not only understand the background to the civil war in Liberia, but we also get a terrifying glimpse of the chaos and brutality of war. As a result, the urgency

of the women's mission is accentuated.

The women raise money to send a delegation to picket the peace conference in Ghana, only to find that once Charles Taylor has been indicted as a war criminal by the International Criminal Court in the Hague and flees Ghana, the LURD participants treat the forum as little more than a prolonged vacation: a well-deserved rest from the more onerous life of waging war in the bush. In between times, of course, while they jockey for positions of power in a new transitional government, the LURD warlords orchestrate a final assault on Monrovia from their hotel bedrooms. While Monrovia burns, they throw petrol on the flames.

Not surprisingly, the tempers of the peace activists begin to fray, and in the nail biting climax of the documentary, we see the women lay siege to the conference hall in Accra. No food is allowed in or out. No one present can leave.

The offensive to make the warlords grasp the seriousness of the situation is led by Leymah Gbowee – a social worker and leader of the Liberian Women's Peace Movement. When the Ghana authorities attempt to arrest her for "obstructing justice," Gbowee goes ballistic. She takes off her head cloth and begins to strip off her clothes until General Abdulsalami Abubakar – a former Nigerian president and chief mediator at the conference – intercedes. In an impassioned speech caught on video, an outraged Gbowee condemns the warlords with the words: "These people came here, ECOWAS gave them big beds. When they came they were pale. No eating in the bush. Now they are wearing fine Ghana milled textiles...Today they will feel the hunger our people are feeling there!"

The women set a deadline. If an agreement was not reached in two weeks, they would reinforce the siege. Within a fortnight, a peace agreement was signed, and in January 2006, Liberia became the first country in Africa to elect a woman President: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Apart from telling an exhilarating story with drama, verve and poise – *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* is an excellent example of how documentary filmmaking at its best, is much more than a vehicle for documenting the past. The film is keenly feminist and acutely political in so far as it demonstrates the tremendous clout of women's social activism. Indeed, the documentary is a valiant rallying call for people around the world working to change the status quo – women especially.

However, by focusing on the pivotal role of this particular women's movement in the Liberian peace process – the group was also instrumental in advising the

UN on how to disarm former rebels - *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* can, at times, appear simplistic. Men are rightly condemned, throughout, for their appalling violence and past mistakes. But are all men to blame when many were victims of appalling atrocities as well? And are women presidents necessarily the answer to Africa's social and political problems? What of Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir - the Iron Ladies of British and Israeli politics respectively? And would voting for Hillary Clinton as President automatically set America to rights? I do not think so. Reality, unfortunately, has a habit of being more complicated and nuanced than the simple dichotomy of women versus men; good versus evil.

What the film does touch on fleetingly, however, is a fascinating discourse on masculinity as articulated between General Abubakar and Joe Wyle, a Brigadier General in LURD. The latter wants to fight his way through the barricade of women in Accra, thrashing them in the process. Abubakar castigates him, questioning the younger man's cruel thirst for power, and disregard for the lives of his fellow Liberians. The pot calling the kettle black, perhaps, given Abubakar's service to the notorious Sani Abacha's regime in Nigeria. Nonetheless, his comment raises a salient question concerning the excessive brutality meted out to civilians by rebels in organisations such as LURD, the RUF (Revolutionary United Front, Sierra Leone), the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda) and various militias in the on-going war in the DRC, to name a few. Where does this brutal disconnection between ostensible "liberators" and the communities they are supposed to be liberating come from? Can the "disconnect" only come to an end when men with guns are placated with enough wealth and power, as seems to have been the case at the Accra peace conference?

Pray the Devil Back to Hell is undoubtedly an inspirational film, which I strongly recommend to everyone concerned with the lives of African women, and the impact we can make on the political process. I warmly congratulate Gini Reticker and Abigail Disney as the director and producer, for bringing this moving story to an international audience. Though the film is wonderfully executed, and should garner an array of international awards, I cannot help wishing for the day when African producers and directors will have the resources and skills at their disposal so that we tell our stories ourselves.

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