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At Sundance: Documentaries Take the Day

By *Emily Poenisch*

As Sundance moved past the weekend it was fast becoming clear that the immediate sale of *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired* was an early indicator that the stars of the festival line-up would not be features but documentaries. One standout was *The Linguists*, a fantastic little film that follows professors David Harrison and Gregory Anderson as they crisscross the globe on a mission to document languages on the verge of extinction. From the depths of Siberia to the high reaches of Bolivia, the pair is relentless in their goal, displaying a remarkable patience for interviewing deaf nonagenarians who are frequently the only surviving speakers. While this might all sound horribly sleep-inducing, the excitement of these two professors proves contagious, and as the film reveals how cultural shame and colonialism have factored in the loss of these languages, their incredible dedication becomes all the more compelling.

You couldn't find better counterpoints to a film like *The Linguists*, with its story of cultural preservation, than *The Art Star* and *The Sudanese Twins*, a documentary directed by Pietra Brettkelly that shadows contemporary artist Vanessa Beecroft as she journeys to the Sudan hoping to adopt twins. Beecroft's work has long incorporated human models, so it is no surprise that the two infants are quickly co-opted into a photographic art project as Beecroft awaits to hear how she might circumnavigate Sudanese adoption law and so return to America with the siblings. What exactly Beecroft wants from these children, however, becomes increasingly unclear, as the art project seems to assume as much importance as the adoption process. Although the artist claims she's not "just another white woman wanting something exotic," the fact that she keeps the planned adoption from her husband hardly clarifies her intentions. When she finally admits to being obsessed with images of Angelina Jolie and her children, the selfish, fanciful, and disturbing attitude behind her pursuit of the twins is laid bare.

But it was a documentary filmed a little closer to home that delivered on a truly exceptional level. *Trouble the Water* was directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal and tells the extraordinary story of Kimberly and Scott Rivers, a couple living in the 9th Ward who rescued a large number of fellow residents when Hurricane Katrina struck. The film incorporates 20 minutes of home video recorded by Kimberly, who purchased a video camera for \$20 on a New Orleans street just prior to the storm. This footage, which captures the advent, devastation and aftermath of the storm, is one of the most powerful and immediate records ever seen, and to view it in its raw form is to feel the outrage and disgust at the abandonment of New Orleans all over again. To realize that these two people, with their checkered pasts and lack of fancy educations, had a more advanced sense of social responsibility than the very men and women elected to protect and serve American citizens is to see the ugly, gaping holes in our social preconceptions. The determination and survival of this couple is perhaps the most inspiring story of the festival, and the fact that Kimberly went into early labor the day after the film's premiere, and gave birth to their first child in Utah, certainly speaks to that.

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