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Review: ‘Rain in a Dry Land’

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"Rain in a Dry Land" is in the forefront of the current crop of immigration chronicles, a docu that illuminates a stratum of U.S. life as much as it does the plight of the African emigre. The film's honesty and grit should give it wide appeal and a healthy embrace from festivals.

John Anderson

Rigorously intimate and disarmingly affectionate, “Rain in a Dry Land” is in the forefront of the current crop of immigration chronicles, a docu that illuminates a stratum of U.S. life as much as it does the plight of the African emigre. In following two subject families in their transition from Somalian refugee camp to underclass America, filmmaker Anne Makepeace never reduces them to devices or symbols or anything less than human beings caught in the cross-hairs of global politics. The film’s honesty and grit should give it wide appeal and a healthy embrace from festivals.

Gorgeously, purposefully shot by vet lenser [Joan Churchill](#) and her son, Barney Broomfield, and edited a with sure and sympathetic hand by Mary Lampson, pic focuses on an oppressed minority within an oppressed minority: Somali Bantus who, as the descendants of slaves, were ostracized in Somalia, and managed to escape into Kenya during the civil war in the early '90s.

Makepeace picks up their story 13 years into life at the [Kakuma](#) refugee camp (home to refugees from various African wars) and follows two families — single mother Arbai Barre Abdi and her children, and married couple Aden Kabir Edow and Madina Ali Yunye and their children — as they are prepped for life in a land where they won’t understand even how to descend a flight of stairs.

Makepeace, whose previous films include “Robert Capa in Love and War” and “Baby It’s You,” has chosen two female characters who couldn’t be more different. Through them, she emphasizes the individuality of people who all too often blend in the public mind into a single, indistinct, disenfranchised mass. Both women have experienced horrors, but nothing seems able to blot the sunshine of Arbai’s personality. Madina, on the other hand, wears her war grief like a scar. The way Makepeace unobtrusively but insistently traces the fault lines of Madina and Aden’s marriage provides a kind of dark undercurrent that informs all the other troubles they face.

Joel Goodman’s music, a wedding of African influences and blues, makes its own gradual transition as the film progresses, moving from an African to a more Americanized vernacular as the two families become more accustomed to their new homes—Arbai in Atlanta, Madina and Aden in Springfield, Mass. — and their children adjust, or maladjust, to their problems.

One noteworthy aspect is that Makepeace’s movie never fails to be cinematic regardless of how free-form the director is forced to be, or how difficult the circumstances of a given scene; it almost feels that the film is blessed. Even if the subjects of “Rain in a Dry Land” have much to rail against in their lives, they can be grateful for such a compassionate telling of what is often a heartbreaking story.

Rain in a Dry Land

Production
A Makepeace Prods. presentation, in cooperation with ITVS and in association with POV/American Documentary. Produced, directed, written by Anne Makepeace.

Crew
Camera (color, DV), Joan Churchill, Barney Broomfield; **editor**, Mary Lampson; music, Joel Goodman; sound, Alan Barker; associate **producer**, Su Kim. Reviewed at Santa Barbara Film Festival, Feb. 12, 2006. Running time: 83 MIN.

With
Arbai Barre Abdi, Aden Kabir Edow, Madina Ali Yunye.

FILED UNDER: Baby Its You, Joan Churchill, Kakuma, The Dry Land, Tommy Wirkola

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