

Starz Denver Film Festival | Interview with Henry Ansbacher and Daniel Junge

Liberia's "Iron Ladies" forge nation's recovery

By Lisa Kennedy
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Henry Ansbacher, left, and Daniel Junge are promoting a locally produced feature that follows the first year in office of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first elected female African head of state. (Post / Karl Gehring)

Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is known as the Iron Lady. So, too, are a number of the women in her Cabinet. And who wouldn't need to be made of a metal? The first elected female African head of state has to rebuild a country ripped apart by years of civil war and former President Charles Taylor's six-year rule.

Directors Daniel Junge and Siatta Scott Johnson's "Iron Ladies of Liberia" - following Sirleaf's first year in office - is among a number of locally produced features screening at the 30th Starz Denver Film Festival. Junge and Just Media producer and executive director Henry Ansbacher, who will be in attendance, spoke about making the film.

Q: Was there anything off-limits during the shoot?

Junge: More was off-limits than fair game. Specifically, we were told nothing involving national security could be recorded, and in Liberia this can include just about every conversation. We spent a lot of time forgotten in the hallway and staring at the backside of (Sirleaf's) office door. But at the best of times, we benefited from benign neglect when we were allowed in the room and forgotten while the president went about her business.

Q: Daniel, you said once that festival audiences tend to go a little easy on filmmakers.

Junge: For a filmmaker, there's no such thing as an audience that is too sympathetic! But certainly, festival audiences are the most forgiving of any you will encounter - with the exception of your parents. ... The hope is that through festivals the film can gain momentum to find a wider audience.

Q: I'm sorry your co-director, Liberian journalist Siatta Scott Johnson, isn't going to be in town. What kind of response has she

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gotten?

Junge: We anticipate she'll be well regarded as the voice of everyday people in Liberia when the film is seen there. But the movie has yet to receive a formal launch in Liberia. ... (There) will



President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, right, who took office in 2006, is a former World Bank economist. (Special to The Post)

Junge: Frankly, I don't have the deepest introspection during the filming process. ... So often I'm viewing our material in the editing room with the same perspective that audiences do, with a realization of Ellen's Sysyphian task. ... As a filmmaker, that's rich material, because the stakes are so high. It's difficult not to root for Ellen.

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certainly be pirated copies on the streets there, which in this case we encourage because we feel the message of the film is so important.

Q: Just Media produced one of the early Iraq docs, "Occupation Dreamland." What do you think docs have and haven't achieved in prodding the conversation about the war?

Ansbacher: In today's media landscape, independent documentaries are more important than ever in presenting the complex realities of the war in Iraq. Perhaps what sets independent docs apart from mainstream news stories ... is the time taken to tell the story.

Q: What did you think as you trained your camera on the demands facing the president?

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