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A Chinese immigrant family fights to defend themselves and the legacy of their Chinatown community bank in the new documentary "Abacus: Small Enough to Jail."

Opening Eyes to the Struggles of Others

New documentaries offer something for everyone

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA



There is something about my yearly sojourn to the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival in Durham, N.C. that really helps me reset my perspective. My own suffering and struggle is placed back into the context of struggle around the world. After four days of empathy with the struggles of others, I'm ready to return to my own, in solidarity.

The 18 films that I saw in four days (including 15 feature-length films) offer something for everyone. Here are the first two days worth of films, presented in my own order of preference; the second half will appear next week:

"Abacus: Small Enough To Jail," offers a stunning depiction of a case of structural bias—how it plays out, the high cost to its victims, and the near impossibility of combating it. I'm not sure that the filmmakers realize what they have here, though I tried to speak to it in the talkback afterwards and certainly expect to be using this film as an educational tool myself. I'm afraid audiences likewise won't realize what they are seeing; indeed, a Hollywood Reporter review from its premiere at the Toronto Film Festival completely dismisses any suggestion that racial bias was at work in this particular story, revealing typical ignorance about how such bias manifests.

The story involves a Chinese-American family whose patriarch immigrated to the U.S. as a young man in the early 1950s and, after building a successful career as an attorney, sought to fill the unmet need for a bank to serve the Chinese immigrant community by opening the Abacus Federal Savings Bank

in Manhattan's Chinatown. Some years after two of his four very successful daughters joined him in running the bank, Abacus became the only U.S. bank accused of mortgage fraud following the 2008 financial crisis. There are banking explanations for this, which are addressed in the film, but the deeper story here (demonstrated but never explained directly) is structural bias; this bank was an easier target, its functioning served a community that does not fit into the usual boxes, and its failure would not affect anyone who officially matters. Skilled director Steve James ("Hoop Dreams" and many other wonderful films) knows how to tell a story well, and it takes that sort of skill to tell this one. It also took a highly educated family of lawyers (two of the four daughters are former DAs) five years, several months of trial, and ten million dollars to clear the bank, resources far outpacing what most marginalized people can access. I only hope that a few privileged folks watching this excellent documentary who catch themselves marveling at the unfairness and blindness of District Attorney Cyrus Vance might for a moment consider that his behavior likely most resembles theirs in other contexts. The film will have a theatrical release in May and will also air on PBS's Frontline. You can follow the film's trajectory at abacuumovie.com.

"Whose Streets?" allows black people who protested in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, after the shooting of Michael Brown to tell the story of their experiences of speaking their truth to power and reveals the extent to which they

went unheard. I was struck watching it by what an insistent effort was required to tell their story, and how contrary that story was to the story told by the mainstream media, whose version would more easily (and incorrectly) lay claim to being a "balanced" account. That makes sense to me; the marginalized face terrific struggle to make their voices heard, and have little hope of doing so without a degree of energy and analysis that is not required of the dominant culture -- and yet no claim of balance is valid without accounting for their perspective. Director Sabaah Folleyan impressed me in the discussion that followed the screening; consistent with my theory, she conveyed a deep analysis of the forces at work and the broader context of what happened in Ferguson. The filmmaker used not only camerawork gleaned from the protests but also cell phone footage of police brutality and over-response, along with footage of protesters calling out the mainstream media for not recording such actions. Instances of looting are shown as well, but make a whole different kind of sense against the backdrop of black experience; we see how those actions represent only a small portion of what happened and why, as Martin Luther King Jr., expressed, "a riot is the language of the unheard." This film deserves attention and, thanks to Magnolia Pictures, will be released theatrically in September. You can visit whosestreets.com for updates.

"Strong Island" is the very personal work of director Yance Ford,

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