

Film

To live like my brothers



Courtesy of Dovana Films

Living Rights

Directed by Duco Tellegen
Dovana films, 2004
Japan, Kenya, and Belarus;
Japanese, Maasai, and Russian
with English subtitles; 83 mins

The Human Rights Watch 2005
International Film Festival has
left London for New York
See <http://hrw.org/iff>

Living Rights, shown at the Human Rights Watch 2005 International Film Festival, is documentary at its very best. Comprised of three short films, each focusing on a single child, *Living Rights* is an intelligent work shot with a delightful poetic warmth. Yoshi, Toti, and Lena live very different lives thousands of miles apart. Aside from their seemingly endless charm, the trio are linked only by the albatross spitefully swinging from their tender necks. Yoshi faces life with Asperger's syndrome, Toti must contend with a world in which female circumcision is a routine part of growing-up, and Lena has to decide whether to leave her homeland for a country better equipped to treat what might be a brain tumour. Whereas the subject matter is grave, the subjects are not and their energetic presence engenders optimism just as surely as their plight engenders despair.

The first part of *Living Rights* centres on 16-year-old Yoshi. Japanese law obliges mainstream schools to admit children with disability unless this proves impractical. Yoshi is regarded unsuitable for conventional schooling and so attends a Kyoto-based centre for children with special needs. This placement rankles with Yoshi and early in the film he confesses his "secret"—he dreams of gaining re-admission to a mainstream school. Yoshi's wish turns out to be about as much of a secret as the colour of a greenfly. He bends ear after ear on his wholly understandable desire to "live just like my brothers". Frustrated by an unbearably complex real world, Yoshi simplifies matters by recourse to a fantasy world. In a touching scene, he argues the nature of Asperger's syndrome with his neurologist. To Yoshi his problems are eminently surmountable; his faith is vindicated when his teacher finally permits him to follow a conventional school timetable.

Yoshi's tale is poignant and interesting, invested with the unsentimental humanism that characterises the film as a whole. Disability is briefly examined: Yoshi's mother tells how

his fidgety nature and refusal to maintain eye contact gave early clues to his illness; Yoshi valiantly attempts to explain learning difficulties to his more severely afflicted peers. We glimpse the everyday difficulties of living with Asperger's syndrome. The disorder has left its mark on Yoshi but it is doubtful that it will defeat him. When we leave Yoshi he is determinedly jogging down an open path, there's a chance he's still running now.

Toti's story is the strongest chapter in *Living Rights*. A thoughtful and gentle girl, Toti ran away from her Maasai tribe at age 11 years. The alternative was to be circumcised and married in return for as many cows her parents deemed appropriate. Toti found her way to a boarding school that was set-up for girls in her situation and, 3 years later, revisits her family. The reunion is utterly enthralling; Toti, now educated, interacting with a family whose values have become anathema to her. Computer literate and devoid of superstition, Toti is an extremely impressive and wondrously brave individual; there are hints that she may represent the vanguard of a new movement among Maasai tribeswomen. This is an immensely satisfying passage of film, beautifully shot and thematically rich. The traditions and ideology of the Maasai are unflinchingly described, including a scene in which a tribal elder advances ominously with a razor blade; a chilling confirmation of Toti's summary of the Maasai view of women: "if you're not circumcised, you're not a real person".

The third part of *Living Rights* stars the enchanting Lena, an 11 year old Belarusian girl living with her foster mother in what is essentially a ghost town. Ghoyniki and its surrounding villages have been ruined by fallout from the Chernobyl disaster. A teacher hands out manically clicking radiation meters to the few remaining schoolchildren, none of them should really be there—it's still much too dangerous. For Lena the damage may already have been done: she may have a brain tumour. Lena steadfastly ignores the terrible possibility but she must decide whether to accept the proposal from an Italian family to adopt her, weighing up the implications for her healthcare with the transparent desire of her foster mother that she stay in Belarus.

This final film is lyrical and moving. Lena is impossible not to like, an exuberant and pretty character whose love for life forms a painful contrast with her barren surroundings. Chernobyl was a truly apocalyptic event, stripping life from vast swathes of countryside and poisoning those that were not even born in 1986. *Living Rights* ends on a rather bleak note; unlike Yoshi and Toti, Lena's living rights may well have been cruelly withdrawn.

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