

Stunning 'Iraq in Fragments' Shows Complexity of War: U.K. Film

By Iain Millar

Jan. 19 (Bloomberg) -- As potential Democratic candidates for the U.S. presidency line up to oppose George W. Bush's war policy, James Longley's film "Iraq in Fragments" comes out in the U.K.

It had a limited showing on U.S. coasts and won the award for best documentary directing at last year's Sundance Film Festival.

Longley's stated aim is to humanize the Iraqi people for an audience far away from everyday life in the country. After filming for two years and recording six stories, his final cut breaks into three parts: one each for the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Kurds. The title reflects both the film's structure and the tensions between the different communities and different age groups.

In the first part, Longley focuses on 11-year-old Mohammed Haithem from Baghdad, separated from his family by the war, and torn between working in the mechanic shop of an "uncle" and continuing his education, which has fallen woefully behind.

"He loves me, he's nice to me. He loves me like his son," Haithem says of his benefactor. It's a tough love. He is chastised for not working hard enough and for not learning to write his name.

In part two, Longley is with young supporters of radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr in the tinderbox city of Najaf, documenting the machinations of local politicians and observing a clampdown by religious militiamen on alcohol merchants in the market.

For the third part, he travels to a small Kurdish village, where he focuses on two families and the relationships between a couple of teenagers and their elderly fathers. It's a more relaxed and more "liberal" culture and the film reflects the aspirations of the Kurds for an autonomous state.

Rewarded Patience

Longley never proselytizes, content to let his subjects speak for themselves and relate their own stories, and in so doing, he illustrates the complexities of this unhappy country. He produces some striking images, but never lets technique get in the way of the narrative. His patience with his subjects -- spending long enough in each place to become accepted effectively as part of the furniture - - has paid off many times over.

``Iraq in Fragments" is a stunning achievement that more than deserves the many plaudits it has received.

``Iraq in Fragments" is released in U.K. cities on Jan. 19

(Iain Millar is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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