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#CINEMAFORTHESENSES 11th Annual Byron Bay Film Festival October 6-15

FILM PREVIEW: *CITY OF JOY*

by Jenny Bird

The beating heart of this film lies with a young woman called Jane who lives near the Rwandan border in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It is a country that has been described as the worst place in the world to be a woman.

Alongside tens of thousands of Congolese women, Jane has suffered unspeakable crimes at the hands of rampaging militants who employ rape and gender violence as weapons of war.

One could be forgiven for giving this documentary a wide berth. Yet first-time director **Madeleine Gavin** manages to foreground joy, hope and defiant resilience against a horrific backdrop of war, multinational mining, greed, global indifference, torture, genocide, displacement and poverty.

The film opens to the dancing feet of children in the dust, with a narrator reminiscing about life in the DRC before the war and before the miners arrived – a life of growing sweet potatoes, playing in the river, and winnowing for gold. A life when women and children were safe to roam the fields and forests, work and play. Stunning drone shots introduce us to the countryside around the main town of Bukavu, which, in the past 20 years of war has swollen with more than a million refugees from surrounding villages. The road to Bukavu is a river of human suffering.

Bukavu is now the home of ***City of Joy***, a transition program for women who have been raped and violated in the war that has torn apart eastern DRC since 1996. The women, who have had their bodies repaired in the nearby hospital, live in the City of Joy for six months. They learn to transform their suffering into strength and leadership. They graduate and go back to their villages to lead programs that empower women and protect children.

An unlikely trio founded City of Joy and it is their stories, alongside Jane's, that give the film its structure and its broader context.

We meet Denis Mukwege, a deeply Christian Congolese gynaecologist/obstetrician; Christine Schuler-Deschryver, a Congolese human rights activist; and **Eve Ensler**, the New York-based women's activist and playwright best known for her Tony award-winning play *The Vagina Monologues*.

It is through the stories and experiences of Dr Mukwege and Schuler-Deschryver that we learn about the Congo – its colonial history, the crazed militia that crept over the hills from Rwanda and took the villages unawares, and the role of multinational mining companies in the war.

Dr Mukwege speaks of the horror that overwhelmed him, as the isolated cases of raped and mutilated women who came to his hospital became a flood. It is he who stitches the women back together. It is he who ponders the future for the men and boys who participate in and witness the violence.

Schuler-Deschryver speaks to the relationship between the mining companies, the militia and rape. She describes the strategic and tactical use of rape and gender violence to destroy the fabric of families and whole villages. She speaks of her own trauma and rage in the face of the violence against children.

Ensler has worked in other war-torn countries where rape and gender violence have been used as weapons of war. She could not comprehend the magnitude of the problem in the DRC and having witnessed women telling their stories is compelled to return to New York and raise funds for City of Joy.

We are not protected from the horror that the women have experienced, nor the trauma suffered by Schuler-Deschryver and Dr Mukwege. However the camera and the music offer us welcome respite and remind us that beauty does exist, even in the face of horror.

While the camera stays for the most part up-close and personal with the main characters and the women at City of Joy, it also telescopes us out to wide shots of the stunning landscape, the forest and people in the street. The film is drenched in the rich colours of Africa and the beauty of the landscape. The camerawork serves to give us not only an emotional reprieve but also an opportunity to literally take a wider view of the personal stories to which we are bearing witness.

The soundtrack also plays a role in cushioning us emotionally. A blend of original score and African songs creates a rich, rhythmic and soulful background to the film. A singer/songwriter from Bukavu named **Lokua Kanza** features strongly in the soundtrack, as does **Tomandandy**, a duo from New York who composes electronic film and television scores with an impressive list of collaborations that includes **Oliver Stone, David Byrne** and **Laurie Anderson**.

And then of course there are the journeys of the women themselves. How can we not feel joy as we watch them rediscover their joy? They dance, they laugh, they learn to stand up and tell their stories without shame or fear, and they learn to love their bodies. They learn that they are not alone, that they have a future; that they are immeasurably strong. Ultimately this film uplifts and educates. As Dr Mukwege says, these women have unimaginable strength. The least we can do is bear witness and share their joy.

City of Joy is part of the Official Selection of the **11th Annual Byron Bay International Film Festival 2017**.

The Byron Bay Film Festival is illuminated with two dazzling red carpet gala events in the heart of town. Opening Night offers a chance for industry networking and a taste of the flavour of the festival to come, and features a highlight film screening. The culminating celebration event is an exciting night of recognition for filmmakers, the festival, Byron Bay, and the international film industry, and not to be missed. Early ticket purchases are recommended to avoid disappointment to these two popular events.

The 11th Annual Byron Bay Film Festival is held on Friday 6 – Sunday 15 October 2017 in multiple venues throughout Byron Bay and surrounding suburbs.

Program will be released over the coming weeks.

Tickets are on sale now via www.bbff.com.au

End.

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