

Letters from Litein heartwarming, honest

Documentary keeps drama low-key

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD APRIL 24, 2009

In the opening scenes of filmmaker Matt Palmer's *Letters from Litein*, we see a Calgary father break down when describing his experiences visiting an orphanage in a small tea-farming community in Kenya.

It's a jarring image and one that seems to promise a heady dose of drama will follow; another troubling story from that perpetually troubled continent of Africa. That is until we realize the father isn't recounting anything particularly traumatic, just showing pride in his own children's initiative to travel down to Litein with teachers, parents and fellow students from Calgary's Fred Seymour Elementary School.

While there is no doubting the father's sincerity, it seems like a strangely melodramatic opening for a film that deals mostly in heartwarming gestures, gentle conflict and open-ended questions about the nature of charity. Shot in the seemingly artless style of cinema verite, *Letters from Litein* unfolds without narration or interviews, which leaves much of the onus on the viewer to untangle whether or not an actual argument is being made. Most of *Letters from Litein* takes place at the Kenyan orphanage, and deals with how the Calgarians interact with the locals as they perform medial chores and hand out goodies. These scenes are mostly heartwarming, although a few moments of Western-style entitlement do sneak through. Otherwise, the drama is kept decidedly low-key. We learn the Kenyan home may inadvertently favour the boys over the girls when it comes to prepping them for a life and career. Parents and teachers argue without much tension and we're treated to numerous scenes of children playing--sometimes awkwardly but usually in a fairly carefree way.

In short, the film unfolds so naturally that we may be left scratching our heads at the end, no doubt a symptom of watching so many modern documentaries that bombard us with politically charged points of view. One of the most powerful scenes is when the group's van is surrounded by glue-sniffing young street kids who possess none of the comforting gratitude and cheery smiles of the orphans they've come to help.

Moments like this are beautiful in their honesty. It leaves us with the feeling that we are not being manipulated. There are no reality-show asides, where the kids unload about their experiences. There's no narration to tell us how to feel. In the end we are left feeling good about the children and the connections they've made, without glossing over the fact that even those with the best intentions can face moments of doubt when confronting the unfamiliar.

Letters From Litein

A Documentary Directed By Matt Palmer

Rating 3 ½ out of five

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