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FILM REVIEWS

Letters to Africa

Calgarian-helmed documentary not your average feel-good story
Published April 23, 2009 by [Lindsey Wallis](#) in [Film Reviews](#)

Audiences going into *Letters from Litein* expecting a feel-good story about Calgary children "making a difference" in a small African community are in for a surprise. The film is a raw, honest documentary, shot in cinema--vérité style, without the regular coat of varnish.



A well-meaning Calgary school learns that helping Africa isn't quite as simple as it seems in the documentary *Letters from Litein*

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"I didn't want to make a World Vision commercial," says director Matt Palmer. "It's real. We didn't want to sugar-coat it. To do that would have been a disservice to what really happened and also to the people watching the film...We are trying to show the experience as it happened."

Palmer never thought he would make a film about Africa, but when he heard that the students at Fred Seymour Elementary (where he attended Grades 1 and 2) were collaborating with a local songwriter to record a CD and use it to raise funds for an orphanage in Kenya, he instinctively felt he had to make a film about it. "I don't know why I felt I had to do it," he says, "But it has been the most amazing experience I have ever had. I'll treasure it forever."

For Palmer, actually visiting the African community of Litein shattered his preconceptions about Africa. "All you hear about is war and AIDS in Africa, but when I got there it was completely opposite of everything I had heard," he says. "It was beautiful. The people were unbelievable and the kids just steal your heart."

Palmer says he realized that for the documentary to be effective, the Calgarian children had to visit the children in the African orphanage. "We didn't have any money to make it happen, but I went home and started writing about it on my blog and kids started going home and talking to their parents about it," Palmer recalls.

In August 2006 a group of students from Fred Seymour went with their parents to Litein. The documentary shows how the Calgary families struggled with letting go of the idea that everyone should live like them. "I saw how easy it is to fall into the trap of 'Let's go change everything,'" Palmer says.

The film also shows that the directors of the orphanage are aware of this attitude, and depicts their efforts to educate the Canadians. The director said "It needs you to take more days to understand the African way of living," and points out that next time they want to help, the Canadians should do more research and consult with local advisors.

Palmer said his team chose to shoot the documentary in vérité style because he wanted the audience to experience events as they unfolded. "It's a lot harder, because you don't have narration or interviews to fall back on," he says. "I knew it was going to be more challenging for the audience, but I felt it would be far more rewarding." He wants people to make their own judgments about the events in the film, because, as he puts it, "I don't have the answers."

Palmer returned to Litein in the summer of 2007. He discovered the kids were most affected by the connections they made with the Canadian children, not the things that were given to them. "The message I hope people get from the film is: it's not about money," he says. "It's about making the connection and finding out what it is like to be in their shoes, and just respecting that, though their life may be different from ours, it doesn't mean there is any less value in the way they live."



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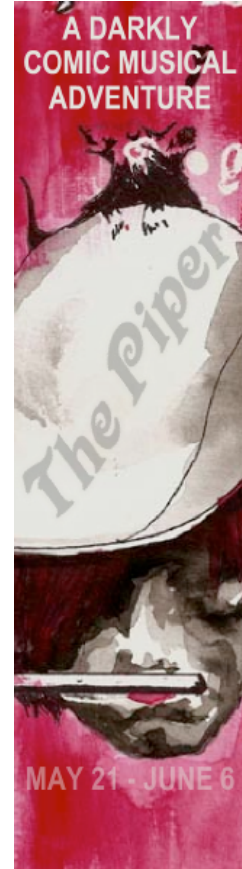
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