

## Focus is on apartheid in 'Have You Heard From Johannesburg?'

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Inside a Berkeley film studio last week, documentarian Connie Field shared a hearty laugh with her editor, Greg Scharpen, as they cued a propaganda newsreel issued by the apartheid-era South African government.

The announcer dryly referred to the two-race system as "a program of multinational development."

Field smirked at the announcer's delivery.

Scharpen rewound the clip. "That's got to get in here somehow," Field pleaded.

It may be a difficult squeeze.

For more than 10 years, Field, who has received two Academy Award nominations for documentaries, has been working on a monumental six-part series about apartheid titled "Have You Heard From Johannesburg?"

On Friday, the first installment, "Apartheid and the Club of the West" is opening at the Roxie Cinema in San Francisco. The remaining episodes, which are all in rough or fine cut, won't be completed until October 2008, Field said.

"Club of the West" retells the story of how U.S. sanctions and student protests led to the downfall of an unjust system. The film will dredge up feelings of nostalgia for anyone who can recall a time when raging in the college quad or marching in the streets actually helped sway U.S. foreign policy - a time when the White House was forced to acquiesce to the demands of the people.

"Hopefully," Field said at her studio, "this can remind people that it's still possible. People can change foreign policy."

Starting with the U.S. Black Congressional Caucus, led by then-Congressman Ron Dellums, the American side of the anti-apartheid movement picked up momentum

only after students conceived the "divestment" strategy. It was a critical turning point in American activism: Dollars spent at home could affect a regime change abroad.

It was also a time when being isolated from the United States meant more than a financial loss; it also amounted to humiliation on the world stage by the most powerful nation.

"They felt a pride then that they don't feel today," Field said of the politicians and students who show up in her film. "People want to feel that way again in this country. ... We stand for very little in terms of world progress, at this particular moment."

When Field started the project in 1996, most documentarians who took on apartheid stuck to the Nelson Mandela story arc, which helped peg black South Africa's liberation to one character.

But after her first trip to the country, Field found herself lost amid mounds of research and gaps in archival footage that pushed her to tell the larger, global story of how the world responded to apartheid. Thanks to media blackouts, South Africa's archives were devoid of the violent images that Americans witnessed on "Nightline" and that Europeans saw on BBC.

"This was a time when the world rallied on the streets," Field said. "That's the story I wanted to tell. Maybe the last epic human rights struggle of the century that the world took part in."

Field conducted most of her work pre-Internet - archives weren't a click away and setting up an interview with Pik Botha, South Africa's former foreign minister, wasn't as easy as sending an e-mail.

Still, Field and her team amassed more than 1,500 hours of archival footage, 6,000 photographs and conducted 135 interviews in nine countries.

Then they brought it back to the Berkeley studio, where, along with Scharpen, she's been editing it down since 2000.

As Scharpen put it, "We're only trying to tell a story that covers half a century of global history." (Scharpen, 33, started the job as an archivist in his early 20s.)

Field recalled that when she originally pitched the project to PBS in the late '90s, an executive feared she'd return with "a movie about *activists*. And who wants a movie about activists?" she groused.

Instead, Field employed what she calls her "history verite"-style of storytelling - a technique in which she interviews the people who made the history, not those who analyze it. Unlike Ken Burns, who can rely heavily on journalists and academics (and even comedian Billy Crystal for his "Baseball" series), Field is most interested in first-person accounts.

This style dates back to her first successful feature, 1981's "The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter" - "I beat the academics to that one," Field said. She had originally moved to Berkeley from New York City in 1975 to work with a feature film collective. But after she attended a Rosie the Riveter reunion, she was drawn to the nonfiction format. After tracking down the World War II female workers, who'd mostly been forgotten four decades later, Field used their testimonials to compile a stirring documentary.

Since then, she's earned Academy nominations (1990's "Forever Activists" and 1995's "Freedom on My Mind") and maintained the stripped-down, facts-only style of storytelling that is in contrast to the documentaries that earn Academy nods today.

After decades of simple testimonials, the medium is gaining popularity through first-person characters: Michael Moore, Al Gore, Morgan "Supersize Me" Spurlock, who all lead their audience through a dilemma and then a conclusion.

With "Club of the West," and the rest of the apartheid series, Field is aiming to tell a world history from the archives.

"It's a different style," Field said of contemporary documentaries. "But for me, when you're dealing with history, you make the story clear, and the drama will come from that."

**Apartheid and the Club of the West:** Opens tonight. Roxie Cinema, 3117 16th St., San Francisco. [www.roxie.com](http://www.roxie.com).

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