



Calendar

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Rosenberg: A Unique Documentary in 'Witness'



Howard Rosenberg
TELEVISION

'Witness' to the Slaughter

Nearly 13 million viewers saw NBC's recent "Crocodile Hunter: Captured on Camera." What a wasted opportunity, one that could have helped animals instead of celebrating a self-serving buffoon who uses them to praise himself.

That would be Aussie Steve Irwin, star of his own overwrought series titled "The Crocodile Hunter" on cable's Animal Planet. In his signature mopy hair, khaki shirt and shorts, Irwin has built a career out of using reptiles and other animals as personal props in front of cameras under the pretense of aiding them.

As with NBC's largely stale footage, which opened with Irwin repeatedly taunting a lunging alligator until she bit his hand. That was replayed, along with close-ups of the wound, so that viewers could experience the full peril he bravely faces on behalf of the animals he invites to strike him.

"My expertise is rescue," Irwin boasted. His bigger expertise? Self-promotion. "I've been known to jump out of a perfectly good boat to rescue a crocodile," he told viewers . . . humbly.

Television dines on facile conflict. So Animals vs. Humans becomes its gruel, creating a twisted reality that nourishes fear of animals as our natural adversaries and a belief they're ours to exploit. Coming soon on Fox's FX cable channel, for example, are three more nights of lowbrow "When Animals Attack." As if humans attacking them weren't the real crisis.

Much more laudable is "The Witness," a unique, indelible 43-minute documentary that may be the most important and persuasive film about animals ever made. And one that most Americans will not see unless mainstream TV's programmers find the backbone to run it.

"The Witness" has already been rejected by animal-friendly HBO. "We thought it was a good show, but we've aired a couple of others on a similar topic, and have another in development," an HBO spokesperson said. Plus James LaVeck and Jenny Stein, the Ithaca, N.Y., filmmakers, have not heard back from "POV," the PBS series whose personalized documentaries would be a perfect fit.

The importance of "The Witness" lies in its subject matter combined with its unconventional voice that denounces cruelty.

Although threaded by grisly undercover footage from animal rights groups, "The Witness" is no sermonizing shock video. While speaking eloquently against animals being butchered for food or their coats, it tells a deeply soulful story of redemption that is quite remarkable, one whose unlikely center is a 44-year-old former tough guy whose personal odyssey, from disdain of animals to being their champion, merits a TV movie or feature film.

He's Eddie Lama.

After encountering him at a 1997 animal rights conference and hearing his transforming story, "We understood that something very extraordinary had come into our lives," said LaVeck. A year later came a three-day shoot at Christmas for this film that LaVeck and Stein see as the first of four their young company, Tribe of Heart, will make on individuals involved in animal issues.

Lama launches the project charismatically.

He's no animal-activist stereotype—no hysterical screamer, quaint retiree with too much time on his hands or woody do-gooder with both Birkenstocks firmly planted in an ivory tower.

Instead, the voice on the cell phone from New York City could

be Joe Pesci in "GoodFellas."

"We grew up on the streets of Brooklyn," said Lama, a concrete and aluminum contractor, in straight-talking urbanese. "You made your claim to fame by how many asses you kicked. Everybody's middle name was 'the'—like 'the Rock' or 'the Hammer.' The heroes were wise guys with pointy shoes and Cadillacs, and I wasn't exempt from that."

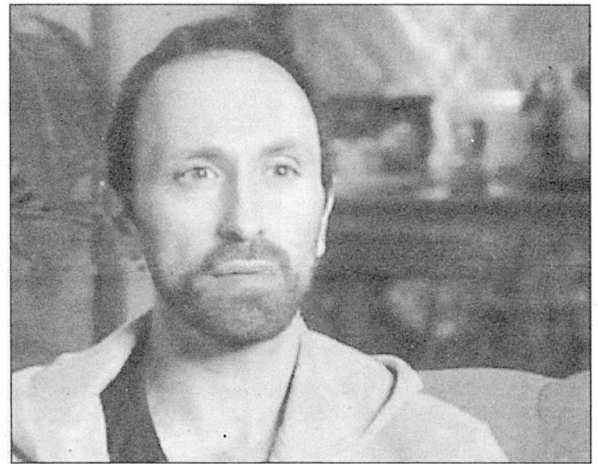
It's hard squaring the younger mean-streets Eddie with the one in this unnarrated low-budget film, sweetly stroking his cats and cruising commercial areas in his customized van that exposes pedestrians to movie-screen-size videos of farm and fur animals being slaughtered.

Responses from Christmas shoppers become the film's heart-wrenching climax. A few seem oblivious. Otherwise, jaws drop and curiosity, shock, dismay, even horror fill these faces. A man grimaces, a woman turns away in anguish, their reactions mirroring the sensitizing undergone by Lama years earlier.

"Before I was involved with animals, I didn't give a damn about anyone," he said. "I was an alcoholic. When I got sober and selfishness started slipping away, I found myself crying for the plight of the homeless man. I began advocating for the disenfranchised. I would go out in the streets and tell people about the atrocities committed against political prisoners in China. When I did the same thing for the animals, people would be horrified and realize I was talking about them, because everyone who ever had a hot dog or hamburger is complicit."

If personal growth is measured in epiphanies that click on over heads like lightbulbs, then Lama is in the high-wattage club.

In "The Witness," he traces his journey with humor and passion, including his violent "blood and guts" past and the aversion to animals his family taught him as a kid. His U-turn toward enlightenment began when he reluctantly agreed to cat-sit for a friend only because he wanted to date her. The cat bonding swift, his anti-animal biases began falling like domi-



Animal rights activist Eddie Lama's story is told in "The Witness."

noes.

Next came Moo Moo, the adopted stray that ended Lama's two-pack-a-day cigarette habit amid swirling secondhand smoke. "It was the sense that I was doing harm to . . . my cat, that would choose not to be harmed if he could speak, y'know? Don't ask me if this happened, but I coulda sworn he coughed."

Third member of this life-altering cat trilogy was Bagel, a sickly runt when rescued by Lama. Squeezing Bagel's leg all the way to the foot reminded him of a drumstick. So much for meat eating.

He did research, saw horrific undercover films showing animals being trapped and killed for fur, finding no difference between them and his cat. "I couldn't see my companion, this beautiful little creature, be gassed, clubbed, stepped on and have her skin ripped off her back for somebody's earmuffs."

Lama said he learned of slaughter-bound pigs being "given drugs, having their ears clipped and their snouts smashed. A lot of them die on the way to the slaughterhouse, a lot don't die with the first blow and are boiled alive." Long-discarded concepts of sin reentered his brain. "Why would pigs have to suffer this much? I thought maybe they were these horrible sinners being reincarnated as pigs, as food animals, and this was their punish-

ment. Maybe Hitler reborn, because that's what he deserves. I mean these were the crazy ideas that went through my mind."

Channeling despair into action, Lama fixed up one of his company vans with the mobile theater he calls Faunavision (later becoming the name of the nonprofit group he would found along with Oasis, an animal sanctuary in the Catskills). He began taking it out several nights a week with two buddies, one his childhood pal, Eddie Rizzo, whom he'd converted to veggiedom with a soliloquy in a diner describing the brutality pigs endure en route to becoming sausage on a pizza.

Truth can be painful. Yet "The Witness" is one man's truth that cries out for mass exposure, affirmed by film-festival honors it's won. As for commercial TV, fat chance. "We've been told by people in the industry," said LaVeck, "that it would never be shown on the commercial networks, because the need to keep advertisers happy would preclude that."

Give them crocodiling for dollars any day.

• "The Witness" can be obtained from Tribe of Heart at Box 149, Ithaca, NY 14851 or at orders@tribeofheart.org.

Howard Rosenberg's column appears Mondays and Fridays. He can be contacted by e-mail at howard.rosenberg@latimes.com.