Rosenberg: A Unique Documentary in ‘Witness’

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 hero 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 characteristically. 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 unaired low-budget film, sweetly stroking his cats and cruis- ing commercial areas in his customized van that exposes pedestrians to moviescreen-size videos of farms and for animals being slaughtered.

Responses from Christmas shoppers become the film’s heartwrenching climax. A few seem oblivious. Otherwise, jaws drop and curiosity, shock, dismay, even horror fill these faces. A man grainy, 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 self- awareness 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 talk to 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 theirersion to ani- mals his family taught him as a kid. His U-turn toward enlightenedment began when he reluctantly agreed to cat-sit for a friend only because he wanted to date her. The cat bonding swift, his anti-ani- mal biases began falling like dominos.

Next came Moo Moo, the adopted stray that ended Lama’s two-pack-a-day cigarette habit, amid swinging 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 could sworn he coughed.”

Third member of this life-altering cat trilogy was Bagel, a sickly runt when rescued by Lama. Squeezing Bagel’s 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 slaugh- ter-bound pigs being “given drugs having their ears clipped and their snouts smashed. A lot of them died on the way to the slaughterhouse, a lot don’t die with the first blow and are boiled alive.” Long-dis- carded 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 Faunus Vision (later becoming the name of the nonprofit group he would found along with Oasis, an animal sanctuary in the Cats- killas. He began taking it out several nights a week with two bud- dies, one his childhood pal, Eddie Rizzo, whom he’d converted to veggieliving with a soliloquy in a dicer describing the brutality pigs endure en route to becoming sau- sage 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 crocodiles for dol- lars any day.

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

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