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Slamdance Review: 'Kidnapped for Christ' Unmasks Christian Reeducation Camps

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2014

One of the most compelling, enraging and ultimately inspiring documentaries of the past few years, *Kidnapped for Christ* pulls back the curtain on Christian reeducation camps where parents forcibly send their supposedly wayward teens to learn to behave with greater obedience and faith. Director Kate Logan, who began the project as a student at Biola University, was granted considerable access to one such camp, Escuela Caribe in the Dominican Republic. There she recorded candid observations and revealing interviews with teens and school leaders alike, and began a filmmaking odyssey that lasted more than five years.

Logan, who at the beginning of the film describes herself as an Evangelical Christian, started shooting with a predisposition to support the school's program. Within the first few days, however, she met David, a 17-year-old from Colorado who had been abruptly awakened one night and dragged from his bedroom as his parents watched and approved. His "teachers" continued to drag him through Miami airport to Escuela Caribe, where escape is impossible and small infractions result in social and corporal punishment. (The filmmakers were not permitted to document the barbed wire and armed guards that surround the school.) Early in the film, David reveals that his parents had sent him here because he is gay. His desire to regain a relationship with his parents, coupled with his admirable self-assuredness and openness, form the emotional core of the story.

As Logan continues to make her documentary, her attitude about the school changes, and she begins to distrust its leaders and even question her own faith. After six weeks of documenting psychological abuse and worse, Logan becomes a character in the drama by smuggling a note from David to his friends in an attempt to secure his freedom. What follows is suspenseful and emotional, edge-of-your-seat material, with a denouement that is unexpected and completely earned.

The project halted for several years as Logan battled legal challenges, and waited until David, now a college senior, was prepared to share his story fully.

None of the parents appear on camera, nor have they seen the movie, and the filmmakers take pains not to vilify them, contending that parents are duped about what goes on at these Christian boarding schools. But it is impossible not to be angry at the parents for their lack of compassion and proper guardianship, and for their failure to demonstrate heartfelt remorse for what they did to their kids.

One of the most remarkable elements of *Kidnapped for Christ* is the fact that the teens, and Logan herself, do not blame religion for this travesty; in fact, they retain their Christian faith. Logan's personal transformation is fundamental and moving. At a Q&A after the screening, she explained that she had been brought up to believe that to be gay is to sin. Today she is changed, and her next film will be about a Methodist pastor who was defrocked for performing gay marriages (watch for the Kickstarter campaign coming soon).

A smart distributor like HBO or Netflix should kidnap this film. It deserves a qualifying theatrical run, which will be followed by sustained VOD life. DVD sales to institutional audiences, advocacy groups and yes, even churches, will also be viable. (Pic is being repped by WME and Preferred Content.)

Image: David in 'Kidnapped for Christ.'

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