



Brother Number One
Richard Kuipers
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A New Zealand Film Commission, NZ on Air, TV3, U. of Auckland presentation of a BNO, Pan Pacific Films production. (International sales: BNO Prods., Auckland.) Produced by Annie Goldson, Rob Hamill, James Bellamy. Executive producer, Goldson. Directed by Annie Goldson. Written by Rob Hamill, Goldson.

With: Rob Hamill, Kulikar Sotho, Gail Colley, Hillary Holland, Elizabeth Becker, Sophal Ear, Meas Muth, Vann Nath, Buo Meng, Prak Khan, Karim Khan, Nhem En, Youk Chhang, Sue Hamill. (English, Khmer dialogue)

In the deeply moving docu "Brother Number One," New Zealander Rob Hamill confronts Comrade Duch, the Khmer Rouge leader who ordered the torture and execution of Hamill's brother Kerry at the notorious S-21 prison in 1978. Helmed by respected Kiwi documaker Annie Goldson ("Punitive Damage, 1999"), pic will move many to tears with details of what befell Kerry and millions of others at the hands of the genocidal regime. Fests and pubcasters should snap it up, and a theatrical release in New Zealand is in the works.

Though it covers some of the same ground as 2003's "S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine" and this year's "Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell," both by Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh, "Brother" differs significantly by focusing on one of the few Westerners taken to S-21 (Tuol Sleng Prison), commanded by Duch during the April 1975-January 1979 reign of Democratic Kampuchea.

Sailing around Asia in April 1978, 26-year-old Kerry Hamill and two friends drifted off course in a storm and were captured by a Khmer Rouge gunboat. One crew member was killed instantly; Kerry and Englishman John Dewhirst were sent to S-21. Kerry's death was not officially confirmed until 1980, when Rob was 16.

The devastating effect on the Hamill family is delicately threaded through Rob's appearance as the only Westerner to make a victim statement and ask direct questions of Duch (real name, Kaing Guek Eav) during his 2009 trial. A born-again Christian who once worked for World Vision, Duch was arrested in 1999 and is the first senior Khmer Rouge figure to face court. Though he acknowledges the atrocities committed in S-21 and shows remorse, Duch maintains he was following orders.

Outside the courtroom hearings, Rob is able to recover Kerry's "confession" of his involvement with the CIA. In scenes that will make many viewers wonder how he managed to maintain composure, Rob later comes face-to-face with Nhem En and Prak Khan, photographer and interrogator, respectively, at the prison where at least 14,000 people perished.

Some of the most affecting sequences show Rob meeting machinist Chum Mey and artists Vann Nath and Buo Meng, three of only a dozen reported survivors of S-21. A forceful presence throughout the film is Kulikar Sotho; acting as Rob's interpreter (and one of the docu's line producers), Sotho offers a heartbreaking account of her family's fate, and incisive commentary on the collective trauma her country continues to endure.

Using archival footage in short and highly effective bursts, docu conveys the still almost unimaginable horror of Kampuchea under Pol Pot (aka "Brother No. 1"), and of the process by which an individual such as Rob Hamill can gain some small measure of comfort by knowing that finally someone has been brought to justice.

Docu's technical work is of the highest order, with expert lensing by Jake Bryant and "Hoop Dreams" ace Peter Gilbert.

Camera (color, HD), Peter Gilbert, Jake Bryant; editors, James Brown, Goldson; music, Soundroom; sound (stereo), Tim Champroniere; line producers, Kulikar Sotho, Catherine Madigan; associate producer, Chakara Lim. Reviewed on DVD, Melbourne, Aug. 4, 2011. (In Melbourne, New Zealand film festivals.) Running time: 99 MIN.