



## The report of the Dirk Vandersypen Award jury 2006

*by Frans Lefever*

I have had the pleasure of being present at the five presentations of the Dirk Vandersypen Award and being a member of the jury for the last three years. It is encouraging to observe that the number of contributions and the quality of the productions have risen year after year. It is noteworthy that again this year the majority of the 32 contributions were by film-makers from Europe, Canada and the United States. This of course demonstrates the continued interest and engagement people have here for Latin America. Another important factor is that we here benefit from a good financial and production infrastructure. In Latin America audiovisual artists often lack even the most elementary form of organisation. They are therefore less present and visible in the international circuit. The Dirk Vandersypen Award therefore itself goes to great lengths to try to locate these documentary makers. This is no easy task.

In all these years the Dirk Vandersypen Award has not changed much with respect to content; the dominant themes are still injustice, poverty and repression, and the reaction to these issues ranging from resignation to resistance. Immigration is also a theme that we are seeing more and more often in many of the entries.

But more than before, hope and optimism are present. The documentaries also now tend to often have a more or less 'happy ending'.

The jury did not take the means that were available for the productions into account; some documentaries are large-scale productions, others are low-budget. But this is not considered to be relevant in the actual selection. What is relevant is whether the productions were original or innovative, or whether they evoked strong emotions or gave us food for thought - but we always considered the entries against the backdrop of how Dirk himself had approached the poignant issues: the fate of the individual, a portrait of the man or woman of the street in a broader political, socio-economic context.

Also noteworthy is how new technologies and the development of modern lightweight cameras have changed how documentary makers go about their work: more and more you see filmmakers doing their own camera work, and they do the sound themselves as well. This increases their engagement and intense involvement with the subject matter.

The three contributions that were finally nominated all demonstrate different subject matter and styles, and they are situated in three different Latin American countries. This alone illustrates the richness of the selection this year.

The second runner-up is **THE DEVIL'S MINER**, by the American Kief Davidson and the Austrian Richard Ladkani. They went to Potosi in Bolivia to show how children risk their lives every day in the silver mines of Cerro Rico.

This is not the first documentary that has been made of the mines of Cerro Rico – which have been exploited - and exploiting if you will - for all of 450 years, and which have cost the lives of 80 million people. But there is something very exceptional about this film. It distinguishes itself by its focus on a religious theme; the mine workers are entangled in a bizarre religious conflict: above ground they revere God, underground the Devil. Another paradox of this film is the harrowing life in the mines compared to the positive hope of a future.

The runner-up **ROMANTICO** by the American Mark Becker is a different kind of production entirely. It is a story about illegal immigration. The film is divided into two parts; first we follow the lives of Carmelo and his friend Arturo who eke out a survival as *mariachi* street musicians in San Francisco. They barely make ends meet, especially since most of their hard-earned money has to be sent back to their family in Mexico.

The whole film focuses on Carmelo, a charming and captivating character –though perhaps a bit naïve – who leads an average, mediocre life. But this film is anything but mediocre. This is especially apparent in the second part of the film: Carmelo has gone back to Mexico – homesickness for his family and country had drawn him away from the United States. In the fragment in question Carmelo tells how everything began to go wrong in the States. The way that this is filmed and mixed, together with the atmosphere painted of the provincial Mexican city where Carmelo lives, is pure magic realism. This story also has an optimistic undertone. Although Carmelo earns less with his music in Mexico, he is – being closer to his family – a happier man.

**The winner is JUSTICA by the Brazilian-Dutch filmmaker Maria Ramos.**

The jury's decision was unanimous and full of praise for the prize-winning documentary. The film dates to 2004 and everywhere it has been viewed, it has met with enthusiastic response. Now the film is getting the recognition here too that it so rightly deserves.

In Justica everything revolves around observation and registration, there are no interviews. The filmmaker follows the three most important people involved in a criminal trial in a court of Rio de Janeiro: a judge, a pro bono lawyer and a young

defendant. They are all, each in their own way, prisoners of the bureaucratic Brazilian legal system.

The jury praises the intense, oppressive atmosphere that Ramos was able to create of the hearings in the courtroom and the degrading conditions of the remand custody.

The style is strong; the images are carefully chosen and clearly framed with a sharp eye for detail – often sombre: the chilliness of the buildings, the telling body language of the judges (are they listening at all?), life in the prison.

But the film also has great societal relevance; this portrait of young criminals of petty crime and how the Brazilian legal system deals with them says much about elements which dominate Brazilian society: the social inequality, the two-tiered society and the total lack of perspective for many youngsters. It's food for thought about our own situation.