

Those New Directors Keep On Emerging . . .

Misery loves company, and no one in turn loves misery more than newbie filmmakers. That, at least, is one of the conscience-thwacking lessons of the 36th edition of New Directors/New Films, the annual joint venture of the department of film at the Museum of Modern Art and the Film Society of Lincoln Center that opens tonight. Dedicated

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to the work of what the festival terms "new or emerging" filmmakers, New Directors/New Films has served as an early stopping point for former up-and-comers from Chantal Akerman to Spike Lee and Wong Kar-wai and many more filmmakers who faded from view or never finished emerging.

Whether because of the state of the world, the states of mind of the festival's half-dozen programmers or those of the filmmakers, this year's slate of 26 features — some of which have yet to secure American distribution — and miscellaneous shorts seems to mete out a greater abundance than usual of sorrows from around the globe. Some of these offerings feel as exploitative as any-

An up-and-comers' festival that once featured Spike Lee and Wong Kar-wai.

thing produced by Hollywood at its most craven; a few veer close to unhappy art-house self-parody.

The heart-rending American documentary "War/Dance," about Ugandan children of war, earns its tears more honestly than most nonfiction work of this like-minded type, though it does stumble into morally precarious terrain. Directed by the husband-and-wife team Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine, "War/Dance" focuses on a group of children in a northern Ugandan refugee camp, who, having survived the butchery of the rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army, are preparing for a national music and dance competition. The setup sounds obvious at best, a near-caricature of those contemporary social-issue films about Africa in which catastrophe is met with redemption. But the documentary plays out more complexly than its bare bones suggest, largely because the three remarkable children at its center — Rose, Dominic and Nancy — are too individuated to be clichés and too marked by tragedy to become figures of uplift. Their smiles are tran-

sitory, ghostly.

"War/Dance" works partly as a sympathetic competition narrative with scenes of the children singing, dancing, playing instruments and taking baleful instruction from visiting teachers. Loosely shot, with the video camera fluidly darting in and around the children, these rehearsal scenes are interspersed with highly stylized interludes in which Rose, Dominic and Nancy deliver harrowing remembrances of war directly into the now-stilled camera. An exceptional cinematographer, Mr. Fine never fails to miss a smile or rhythmic stomp. But, as one disturbing, intrusive scene of a mourning child suggests, the Fines have yet to fully grasp the moral obligations that come into play every time a filmmaker trains a documentary eye on another person. Just because a subject allows you to show her grief doesn't mean you should. Who, after all, benefits from this image?

The pain of others turns out to be a recurrent theme in New Directors as, too, are the difficulties of such representations. In this regard, the well-meaning Italian drama "Shelter," directed by Marco Simon Puccioni, serves as an accidental test case of what can happen when a filmmaker's heart is more firmly in place than his head. Maria de Medeiros and Antonia Liskova play Italian lovers who, on returning from a vacation in North Africa, discover that a young Moroccan man has hitched an illegal ride in their remarkably roomy S.U.V. Mr. Puccioni evidences a nice naturalistic touch: the Moroccan's interactions with a hustling fellow immigrant have a whiff of musky life. But he also slathers the story in melodrama, as if all that syrup might actually make the medicine taste better.

Also screening during this first festival week is Andrea Arnold's "Red Road," a well-acted slice of British miserablism about a woman out for revenge by any preposterous means necessary. Less studiously flashy, the French selection "7 Years," from Jean-Pascal Hattu, rises above its overdetermined coordinates — a prisoner's wife enters into an unlikely affair — with sympathetic performances and a sharp turn from the obvious. The Argentine close study "El Custodio," from Rodrigo Moreno, starts strongly as an austere story about a bodyguard, but falters with third-act violence. The less said the better about the opening-night selection from the American writer Paul Auster, "The Inner Life of Martin Frost," which finds David Thewlis dreaming up a muse (Irène Jacob) who gallivants about in a T-shirt branded with the word "Hume" that she sheds for art and whatnot.