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Film Reviews

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Sundance

Blood Brother

(Documentary)

By DENNIS HARVEY

A Red Hot Organization, Act V and Light presentation of an Animal production. Produced by Danny Yourd. (International sales: Preferred Content/WME, Los Angeles.) Executive producers, Leigh Blake, John Carlin. Directed, edited by Steve Hoover. Written by Phinehas Hodges, Hoover, Tyson VanSkiver.

With: Rocky Braat, Steve Hoover. (English, Tamil dialogue)

Documentaries don't come any bigger-hearted than "Blood Brother," a highly worked yet non-manipulative first feature for Steve Hoover that requires no string-pulling to achieve its inspirational impact. The subject could hardly be more of an at-first-glance turnoff for most auds -- American goes to India seeking fulfillment, finds it among a community of abandoned women and children with AIDS -- but, almost from the get-go, is so engaging and joyful that word of mouth could well make it a viable theatrical proposition. Broadcast sales are inevitable.

With the filmmaker and his longtime best friend/protagonist each doing voiceover (at first a bit confusingly), viewers get both an inside and an outside perspective on Rocky Braat's story, which starts with a crisis in India, then rewinds to three months earlier.

That was at point at which Braat reluctantly returned to the U.S. after a long spell in India, his visa having expired. Back in Pittsburgh, he found his friends had moved on with their lives, his family relations as dysfunctional as ever.

He had originally gone to India "seeking authenticity" and wanting more from life, and found both at a place he'd had little interest in visiting: an AIDS orphanage near Chennai in Tamil South India.

Instantly bonding with the kids there -- then feeling completely empty upon leaving -- he soon returned for an open-ended stay as an indispensable volunteer. But sans actual employment or other official ties, his visas would continue to periodically force him back to the U.S.

Hoover accompanies Braat back to India after the latest such visit to witness his friend's new life firsthand. (Footage from earlier years presumably comes from Braat's own camera phone.) He finds Braat maintains by choice an impoverished standard of living -- he doesn't want to separate himself from the locals -- and is so loved by his charges he's practically a full-time human jungle gym, as well as a teacher and general Mr. Fix-it.

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His energy and sense of fun clearly have a huge impact on everyone's well-being, in part because he's overcome any skittishness toward constantly being around potentially dangerous bodily fluids.

The uneducated nearby villagers think otherwise, however, and one dramatic development comes when they belatedly realize the orphanage's precise purpose as a shelter for abandoned children and mothers with HIV. (Virtually everyone there save Braat and the cook are virus-positive.) Others include several children's serious, sometimes fatal health downturns, and the protag's bumpy courtship of a local woman toward wedlock.

No dilettante or saint, Braat is utterly sincere in having found a true home here, and the docu effectively channels his deep attachment to the orphanage residents. Despite its ostensibly depressing subject and a few tough-to-watch sequences, "Blood Brother" is never less than engrossing, and it's often delightful.

Hoover's commercial/musicvid background is evident in the degree of attention paid to the very busy visual and audio design, which at first threatens to overwhelm content. But the color saturation, hyperactive editing and other elements end up enhancing a tragic-social-issue film that, against the odds, is more ebullient than sober. Soundtrack of largely original various-artist tracks is also a lively plus.

The entirely donation-funded pic is intended to help support Braat's continued work and residency, with any profits directed there.

Camera (color, HD), John Pope; music, Danny Bracken, A.J. Hochhalter, Keith Kennif, Joseph Minadeo, Wytold; sound, Hoover, Pope; supervising sound editor/re-recording mixer, Dallas Taylor; sound designer, Defacto Sound. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 22, 2013. Running time: 92 MIN.

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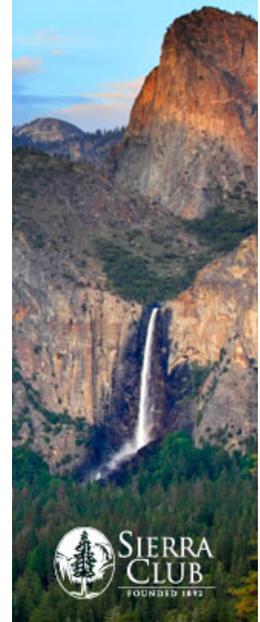
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