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Latino Film Festival

Our Disappeared Nuestro desaparecidos (Docu)

By ROBERT KOEHLER

A Geovision/ITVS production in association with Latino Public Broadcasting. (International sales: Geovision, Watertown, Mass.) Produced by Juan Mandelbaum. Executive producer, Sally Jo Fifer. Co-producer, David Carnochan. Directed, written by Juan Mandelbaum.

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With: Alejandra Dixon, Mercedes Dipino, Rafael Belaustegui, Ruth Weisz.
Narrator: Juan Mandelbaum.
(English, Spanish dialogue)

Like an archaeologist looking for a lost civilization, filmmaker Juan Mandelbaum searches for hints and stories of victims of Argentina's bloody mid-'70s era in the sensitively rendered "Our Disappeared." While it may lean a bit too much toward a PBS-style documentary -- the pic is slated for the public network's "Independent Lens" in spring 2009 -- it reflects Mandelbaum's personal quest to come to terms with his country's most reckless and violent era. As an entry point for viewers unaware or vague on the details and political background, this is a fine primer, and looks ideal for top doc-related fests.

As Mandelbaum explains in his gentle narration, he is a survivor of Argentina's "dirty war," the sad, tragic period between 1976 and 1983, when a military junta sought out, tortured and killed countless left-wing activists, supporters and insurgents.

Though as a student he allied himself with leftist causes and socialist politics, Mandelbaum was not a radical, and, unlike several of his friends, resisted the call for violent revolution against the military. When things become so hot he sensed imminent arrest, however, he fled to the U.S., where he continues to live and work.

"Our Disappeared" chronicles his temporary return home after 30 years' absence, and his search for his close friend Patricia Dixon, who was among the disappeared. In his university's sociology department -- where many of his fellow students were radicalized -- Mandelbaum finds one of his first indicators of Dixon's fate, on a wall-length roll call of names of disappeared alum.

(Dixon's name, in a remarkable film linkage, is next to the names of the murdered parents of filmmaker Albertina Carri, whose "The Blondes" remains the most creative film to come to terms with the national tragedy.)

With help from Dixon's younger sister Alejandra, Mandelbaum pieces together the terrible series of episodes that led to her arrest and disappearance. Typically, when the junta dispatched plainclothed men in anonymous cars to snatch political targets, they were never heard from nor seen again.

But before the film arrives at the final chapter about Dixon's fate, it provides an apt study of the Argentine left's inept attempt at revolution, starting with the impossible coalition of Peronists, Maoists and Leninists that faced off against the junta.

Ultra-right union workers backing former leader Juan Peron and ultra-left students weren't destined to work together for very long, and Mandelbaum laments the degeneration of some in the left into quasi-military cells, mostly led by the well-organized group known as the Montoneros.

It was this group, and the circles around it, which became the junta's top target after a series of Montoneros attacks. Unlike almost all previous dramas and docs about Argentina's disappeared, Mandelbaum's work provides essential context for what was a vicious civil war. He balances this material -- made even more substantial with stunning archival footage including a revealing TV clip of then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger supporting the junta -- with the film's human portraits of relatives and survivors, creating an overall chastening experience.

Camera (color, DV), Vicente Franco; editor, David Carnochan; music, Gustavo Moretto. Reviewed at Los Angeles Latino Film Festival, Sept. 16, 2008. Running time: 99 MIN.

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