

Arts & Ideas

The New York Times

SATURDAY, JUNE 14, 2003

TELEVISION REVIEW

The Stories Statistics Won't Tell

By LAURA MILLER

"This is the crematory where they cremate the dead," says a smiling, slender woman with a plain, pleasant face, as she pauses while walking with a friend through a tree-lined terrace. "I, too, will be cremated. Nobody will come here when I die."

This is one of the piercing moments in the opening installment of "Pandemic: Facing AIDS," a five-part documentary series about the lives of people dealing with the disease in various parts of the world. Directed by Rory Kennedy, it begins tomorrow night on HBO with its first and second parts broadcast back to back, and continues on the following three Sundays at noon.

The woman, Lek, is Thai, and the serenity with which she describes her expected end is only skin-deep. The hospice where she has found shelter is a precious retreat in a lush, bucolic setting, but Lek, a former sex worker, misses her family terribly. When she becomes convinced that she has only three months to live, she suddenly decides that she must visit her parents in their distant village, even though she has so far kept away from them for fear they will be embarrassed if their neighbors learn that she has AIDS. "I'd rather suffer than see my parents lose face," she says.



Ugandan children, members of a choir made up of AIDS orphans in Tororo, in Rory Kennedy's documentary series "Pandemic: Facing AIDS," on HBO.

PANDEMIC: FACING AIDS

"Pandemic" features the usual statistics, text that appears on screen to inform us that every 10 seconds someone dies of AIDS, and that by the year 2010, an estimated 100 million people will have been infected. (The monk who founded the hospice where Lek is staying says that 10,000 patients are on the waiting list for its 200 beds.)

But it is the everyday tragedies and personal dramas that will strike viewers most deeply. When Lek shows up unannounced at her parents' house, her wizened mother caresses her and weeps, while her father stands off, arms folded. Is it disapproval or dismay at his inability to help that holds him back? Lek does not die exactly as she predicted, and while nothing can erase the cruelty of her fate, it is diminished in a way that seems like a small blessing.

In the second part, Ugandan villagers dressed in their best clothes take the bus to a hospital to have their blood tested. This segment focuses on Margaret Boogere and Apollo Jaramogi, who work for the Ugandan Orphans Rural Development Program. Their nation, as the narrator, Sir Elton John, explains, has become "a model success story" in Africa's battle against AIDS.

If Lek's is essentially a family story, this one is about a town. The filmmakers institute a lively debate among the men and women over which sex bears more responsibility for the spread of the disease. One man announces that women should become "so good" that their men will "really love" them and remain faithful. The women scoff at this. "All men are greedy," one declares.

This continuation of an age-old argument takes a grimmer form later, when 2 of the 12 villagers who visit the hospital, a man and

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his 26-year-old wife, learn, on camera, that they're HIV-positive. "It is his fault, and there is nothing to be done about it," the wife says listlessly, holding an infant. If, after they die, the husband's brother takes in their five children, he will be adding them to two of his own.

Ms. Boogere and Mr. Jaramogi's agency cares for Ugandan children who don't have anyone. A tall, gawky woman who radiates kindness, Ms. Boogere leads an orphans' choir in lovely, mournful songs about the pandemic's ravages. Sir Elton's voice-over explains that before such programs provided education and other forms of prevention, AIDS wiped out entire Ugandan villages.

Ms. Boogere and Mr. Jaramogi show the filmmakers an example of this desolation when they take them to James Oburu, a tiny 7-year-old first seen driving a cow with a

PANDEMIC: FACING AIDS

HBO, tomorrow night at 7, Eastern and Pacific times; 6, Central time

Directed by Rory Kennedy; Rory Kennedy and Liz Garbus, producers; Kate Amend, editor; Nick Doob and Tom Hurwitz, directors of photography; Mark Bailey, writer; music by Philip Glass. For HBO: Nancy Abraham, supervising producer; Sheila Nevins, executive producer; Sir Elton John, narrator. Produced by HBO, Moxie Firecracker Films and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

switch. "James is the father in that family," Ms. Boogere explains. His father has died of AIDS, and his mother has run off, leaving only James to care for his even tinier younger sister in a leaky, barren hut.

A grown woman pining for her parents, a little boy shouldering the duties of a man: though there is nothing cinematically daring about "Pandemic," at least judging from the first two episodes, it's impossible to be unmoved by these and other glimpses it offers of human beings faced with such unbearable and, alas, all too avoidable loss.

Laura Miller is a staff writer for Salon.com.

Daughter of Privilege Films Lives of Pain

By NANCY RAMSEY

HARTFORD — Donna Nazario grew up in Waterbury, Conn., in a family of seven children. When she was 13, she began using drugs; when she was 26, she learned that she was H.I.V.-positive and staring at the specter of AIDS. "I came home from the hospital and began saying goodbye to my family, to my mother and my son, who I lived with," she recalled. "I lay on the couch, waiting to die."

That was in 1984, when AIDS was for the most part a death sentence. Her mother was compassionate, she added, but when her sisters visited, they would call her a junkie and demand that she eat from paper plates and cleanse the toilet bowl with Clorox after using the bathroom.

So earlier this month, when Ms. Nazario attended a screening and reception here and saw Rory Kennedy's project "Pandemic: Facing AIDS," a five-part documentary being broadcast on HBO through July 6, "it just blew my mind," she said, adding, "It brought it all back, all the fears I lived with in '84."

The film is set in five countries; each segment is a half-hour. In Thailand, Lok, a young former prostitute, returns to her family's rural village to die. In Russia, a couple who were drug users struggle to rear their son



Getty Images

Rory Kennedy has a new work, "Pandemic: Facing AIDS."

and raise awareness of AIDS; in India, an H.I.V.-positive couple expecting a baby pursue medical treatment so their child will not be infected. In Brazil, a young gay man takes advantage of a progressive drug therapy policy; in Uganda, a 7-year-old boy is head of a household after his father dies of AIDS.

The Thailand and Uganda segments were shown at Trinity College at a reception sponsored by agencies that help people with AIDS. Ms. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy's youngest daughter, attended the event as part

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of an educational outreach campaign.

"That scene in Thailand, when Lek returns to her family, was the most intense scene I've ever filmed," Ms. Kennedy said in an interview on a train from New York to Hartford. Lek was in a monastery hospice when she met her. "Lek was resolved she was going to die," Ms. Kennedy said. "But one morning she said to us: 'I want to go home. I want to say goodbye to my family.'" Lek was transported nine hours by ambulance — a trip paid for by the film crew — to her family's home in a rural village.

"We walked into the house around 11 at night, and Lek fell into her mother's arms, and both of them started crying," Ms. Kennedy recalled. "Her father said, 'Why do you look like that?'"

"'Dad, I'm dying,' she said, 'and I've come to say goodbye.'"

"The father told her: 'Get out of my house. People will see you and never speak to me.' It was painful for him, it went against every cell in his body, but it spoke volumes about the stigma attached to AIDS. To see this young woman, who has taken every iota of her strength put herself on the line and be thrown out like that was very emotional and very painful."

But, Ms. Kennedy added, "thankfully, a few weeks later, her family did reach out to her."

"They brought her home and she was able to die with dignity," she said.

Ms. Kennedy, born after her father

was killed, is 34 and lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Mark Bailey, who wrote the script for "Pandemic," and their 8-month-old, Georgia.

Since graduating from Brown University in 1991, she has made over a dozen films on a range of social issues. In "American Hollow," for example, she examined a large extended family living in rural poverty in Appalachia; in "Women of Substance," the topic was pregnant women being prosecuted for using drugs; "Different Moms" explored mentally retarded parents rearing children of average or above-average intelligence.

Almost 100 people watched her new work at the reception here, as Ms. Kennedy stood outside the door in a lobby, chatting with organizers and taking quick bites of food. She worried aloud that the two segments being presented were "the most depressing."

"I wanted the backdrop of a number of places to be positive," she said later. "In Uganda, even though the story of the orphans is depressing, that country has had success in fighting AIDS. You see billboards that address AIDS; government officials who are HIV-positive have come out publicly; there's a broad distribution of condoms."

Ms. Kennedy was recently on Capitol Hill, where she attended a luncheon sponsored partly by her uncle, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, and showed a preview of her film. Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, contributed an essay to "Pandemic: Facing AIDS" (Umbrage Editions/



James and Jessica, Ugandan orphans shown in Rory Kennedy's "Pandemic: Facing AIDS."

powerHouse Books), the volume that accompanies the documentary. Elton John narrates the film, which cost about \$1.5 million and was financed in large part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"Rory likes to champion minority causes," said Sheila Nevins, HBO's executive vice president for documentaries. "And she has enough celebrity to push those causes into the spotlight. She appreciates that connection. Rory came to HBO with 'Pandemic,' and I think initially wanted us to finance the entire

project. We provided about a third, and I think it took her" — Ms. Nevins paused and laughed — "maybe a week to find the rest?"

Ms. Kennedy speaks eloquently in public about AIDS; she is also clearly used to being asked about being a Kennedy, and answers such questions graciously but quickly. Was there a connection between the Appalachian family in "American Hollow" and her own?

"Of course," she said in the train interview. That family, she noted, had "13 children, my mother had 11 children."

"They live on a farm," she continued. "I grew up on a farm in Virginia."

And what of the legacy of the Kennedy name? A quick nod. "I have been influenced by my family, my mother, my father, my cousins, my uncles and their commitment to public service," said Ms. Kennedy, who in appearance is undeniably her father's daughter. "But making documentaries does not feel like an obligation. It's something I love."

And something that touches others, like Ms. Nazario, the AIDS patient. She continues her battle with AIDS by "putting 27 toxins into my body daily," she said, and works with a nonprofit agency in New Britain, Conn., helping people with HIV and AIDS find housing.

"My family has always focused on the good things about the Kennedys," Ms. Nazario said. "I was crying after the film, for the people in the film and thinking of Rory Kennedy's experience in this."