Documania

Three reality flicks duke it out to deliver a crash course on the global catastrophe

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Don’t expect to hear it from Ebert or Roper, but filmmakers are trying to bring the worldwide AIDS crisis to the HBO and Sundance crowds. Here’s a look at three documentaries that want to get viewers off their duffs and doing something.

State of Denial

Elaine Epstein’s intimate trek through sub-Saharan AIDS opens on a group of South African women at an HIV support group swapping heartbreaks over men who fled when they disclosed their status. Epstein educates gently — following human snapshots with unobtrusive snippets of local newscasts and talking heads. Activists, moms and health-care workers ease each other through poverty and the anti-AIDS treachery of President Thabo Mbeki. We meet South African life-with-HIV columnist Lucky Mazibuko, whose brother discloses only weeks before dying. The film’s complexities may challenge the novice, but Epstein’s deft touch offers ample reward. *Denial* wowed ’em at the Sundance Film Festival and plays on PBS this fall. To order the video, visit www.stateofdenial.org.

A Closer Walk

Robert Bilheimer’s lapel-shaking AIDS sermon may exhaust your sympathies: Its preachiness — coupled with insipid narration by Glenn Close and Will Smith — quickly morphs into sentimentality. Close and Smith intone platitudes that decorate images of anonymous sufferers, intercut with Kofi Annan, Bono and the Dalai Lama. *Walk* only delivers at the end, when Uganda’s Reverend Gideon Byamugisha teaches more about candor and dignity—and what we can actually *do* — in his brief onscreen cameo than Bilheimer’s entire, starchy plea to “make a difference.” *Walk* is currently “being prepared for release”; to order a copy, go to www.acloserwalk.org.

Pandemic: Facing AIDS

Rory Kennedy eschews “big picture” politics to give us five up-close stories — from Brazil to Thailand — of real people with HIV and their families. Russian drug-users-turned-activists Sergei and Lena are heroic standouts. But Kennedy’s film, which plays on HBO Signature from August 23 to September 27, is perhaps *too* nonideological: When Sergei’s hospital closes, you wish she’d target administrators. Still, she combines the cool eye of photographer Nan Goldin with the travel budget of the pope to keep you asking questions. For more info, go to

www.pandemicfacingaids.org.

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