Hope Screens Eternal

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Southern Africa's big export this year -- just in time for World AIDS Day -- is a bushelful of TV documentaries about AIDS. *Steps for the Future* is the first film anthology of this magnitude to be cultivated in the region. And while some viewers may have had their fill of apocalyptic statistics and shots of fly-infested shantytowns, *Steps*' 27 shorts delve deep into the African experience of the HIV epidemic to find humanity, individuality and hope -- or as the series' slogan goes, that "actually, life is a beautiful thing."

Funded by the Finnish government with contributions from Denmark, Sweden and Holland, *Steps* began just last January with an open call for film pitches from HIV positive filmmakers, amateur or professional, in Southern Africa. From some 200 applicants, 27 got the nod, and a team of filmmakers from all over the globe held workshops in Johannesburg and Cape Town to train the aspiring African auteurs.

The resulting films fall into four thematic categories: "My Story" are personal testimonials rich with color and detail about local life with HIV; "Children of AIDS" includes the startling five-minute *Tsoga (Wake Up)*, about a South African school where 70 percent of the students tested positive; "Sex and Relationships" features some sexy PSAs and a few highly creative alternative uses for condoms; and "Healing and Dying" unspools tales of African death rituals and burial -- including the three-minute *Big Balls*, which shows two men building a coffin and reciting the names of friends who have died. "What makes *Steps* so interesting," says Mette Hoffman-Meyer of Denmark's TV2, "is that the local filmmakers have access to a wealth of stories and the truth behind these stories, something a foreigner would never have access to." The movies will be airing internationally on December 1 (for more info, see www.dayzero.co.za/steps).

A little farther east and west is the Filipino-American movie *American Adobo*, a sweet story of five friends living in New York City. Forty-something closeted Gerry (Ricky Davao), in pain because his boyfriend Chris is dying of AIDS, finally comes out to his buddies and finds he has four strong sets of shoulders to cry on. As heartwarming as the savory chicken stew its title refers to, *Adobo* offers a welcome glimpse into an ebullient culture little seen on the American big screen (opens in U.S. theaters in November).

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