Revelations

February 1, 2002 By Stephen Winter

ABC Africa*, New Yorker Films, opens February*

With terrorism and uncertainty gripping the world, it can be difficult to compel film audiences to cast an eye toward problems on shores far from their own. But director Abbas Kiarostami, who put Iran on the world-cinema map with such critically acclaimed films as *Taste of Cherry* (which won the Cannes Palm d'Or in 1997) and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, proves equal to the challenge with his outstanding new documentary, *ABC Africa*, a tender, at times heart-breaking and ultimately uplifting look at the devastation of AIDS and civil war in Uganda.

Out of a population of 22 million, Uganda has more than 2 million people infected with HIV and 1.6 million AIDS orphans. In the hope of promoting AIDS education and global awareness of Uganda's plight, the United Nations' International Fund for Agricultural Development invited Kiarostami to shoot a film.

Although Kiarostami spent decades working with and advocating for Iranian children, his only knowledge of Africa was gleaned from television and the press. But his visit demolished all preconceptions. "Uganda is a beautiful country in terms of nature and people, who, despite terrible poverty, possess enormous inner wealth," he said.

On an initial 10-day visit, Kiarostami and his cinematographer, Seifollah Samadian, traveled across Uganda with mini-digital video cameras to scout locations, make contacts and shoot "visual notes" for the actual film, slated to be shot at a later date. But, after the journey, Kiarostami decided that these visual "notes" were powerful enough to be the final product.

"Filming was very spontaneous," he explained. "I used a Hi-8 camera like most people use a pen." Visiting tiny villages and traveling on dirt roads, Kiarostami and his small team hovered softly as diligent activists educated women about their right to demand condom use and encouraged them to save money and pool financial resources.

However, the real treat throughout the film is Kiarostami's encounters with hundreds of Ugandan children, mostly orphans and many infected with HIV. Exuding vibrant energy, cheery resilience and never-ending resourcefulness in the face of dramatic obstacles, the youngsters laugh, dance, tumble, tease and gaze directly into Kiarostami's lens. The sense of hope, honesty and innocence therein enriches as much as it inspires.

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