Medicine. Monopoly. Malice. ’Fire in the Blood’ -- A New Documentary.

February 8, 2013 By Jay Vithalani

At the Sundance Film Festival last year, one documentary garnered particular praise and attention: the Oscar-nominated *How to Survive a Plague*. And let’s hope that on the 24th of February, it’s David France and Howard Gertler - along with a host of others: the cast who “play” themselves - who get on the stage at the Dolby Theatre to accept those universally-recognized golden statuettes.

I don’t study the splendid shenanigans of Sundance any more; no longer an earnest young cinephile. So it was a surprise to come across news and reviews of another “break-out” (why use a different adjective, journalists, when the Dictionary of Clichés is always handy?) documentary about HIV/AIDS at this year’s festival: Dylan Mohan Gray’s directorial debut, *Fire in the Blood*.

From the film’s Facebook (and IMDb) page:

"An intricate tale of ’medicine, monopoly and malice,’ *Fire in the Blood* tells the story of how Western pharmaceutical companies and governments blocked access to low-cost AIDS drugs for the countries of the global south in the years after 1996 -- causing ten million or more unnecessary deaths -- and the improbable group of people who decided to fight back.

"Shot on four continents and including contributions from global figures such as Bill Clinton, Desmond Tutu and Joseph Stiglitz, *Fire in the Blood* is the never-before-told true story of the remarkable coalition which came together to stop ’the crime of the century’ and save millions of lives in the process."

Genocidal indifference: vastnesses of suffering, a fragile half-century of progress shattered in whole countries, a trail of death that requires seven zeroes after the number 1 to be even approximately mapped, enumerated - that’s “the crime of the century” being chronicled here. Fiery stuff indeed.

I haven’t seen the film, so I can’t comment on its cinematic power, its technical prowess, its structure, and so on. Those who have seen the documentary, however, give it very high marks. (A

sampling of reviews and quotes, below.) And many have commented that *Fire in the Blood* is a "global sequel" to *How to Survive a Plague*.

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Check out the movie's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/fireintheblood) for news of screenings, more assessments, comments and conversations, and videos (interviews, the trailer). But here are a few other sites you might want to visit; I've extracted a few passages from them, to provide a sample of *what* it is that this documentary documents.

(1) www.pbs.org/pov/blog/docsoup/2013/01/fire-in-the-blood-a-must-see-film-at-sundance/#.URVr1vJ7xmg

"And the one film that I'd put to the top of your must-see list is *Fire in the Blood*. This World category entry, directed by Dylan Mohan Gray, who's based in Mumbai, is about how Western pharmaceutical companies block access to cheaper medicines in developing nations, in turn denying people access to AIDS-combatting drugs. Gray speaks to survivors, doctors, and activists. He lays it all out...

"This may be a must-see film but don't think of it as spinach. (Or, if it is, it's as if it were prepared by Alain Ducasse.) Gray crosses the planet and manages to set up a lot of breath-taking wide shots of faraway places that make this a beautiful film to watch. And he talks to people who give great interviews, including Bill Clinton and several mavericks who've led the fight against the pharmaceutical companies.

"Really, *Fire in the Blood* should be considered a companion film to David France's much-championed Oscar-nominated film, *How to Survive a Plague*, about the AIDS activist movement of the 1980s and 1990s. That was history. But the plague continues in the rest of the world." (Tom Roston)

(2) www.variety.com/review/VE1117949149/

"While *How to Survive a Plague* and *We Were Here* have commendably essayed the U.S. end of the AIDS crisis, the devastation the disease has wrought in the developing world is a topic that has long merited a documentary of equivalent substance. Enter *Fire in the Blood*, a basically constructed but rivetingly researched examination of the global fight for affordable antiretroviral therapy against Western pharmaceutical companies, whose restrictive patent laws amount to a death sentence for millions of Third World HIV/AIDS patients. Impassioned, persuasive film won't have trouble spreading its essential message across the fest circuit and beyond."

“[A]fter a mid-2000s breakthrough that led to a 1,000% increase in African patients receiving treatment by 2012, the door looks ominously likely to close again at the behest of the World Trade Organization.” (Guy Lodge)

(3) www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/fire-blood-sundance-review-413424

"Picking up more or less where [*HTSAP*] left off, *Fire in the Blood* is in a sense a global sequel, showing how AIDS activist groups [a provocative claim about activists in the affluent “global north” - JV] and government bodies turned their backs on the plight of Africa, a continent that by 2000 had more than two-thirds of the world’s cases of HIV infection.

"Given the prohibitive pricing of branded drugs and the trade restrictions that kept cheaper generic alternatives out of reach, Africa had minimal access to lifesaving medications for years after they became available. According to one statistic cited by George W. Bush in his 2003 State of the Union address, out of 30 million Africans with HIV, only 50,000 were receiving treatment.

"The explanation for how that genocide of indifference was allowed to continue for so long and now risks a recurrence after some years of reprieve is simple. It boils down to blatant manipulation by the pharmaceutical giants. The most profitable industry on the planet strictly interprets the word ’patent’ to mean ’monopoly.’

"Just as France’s film identified heroes within the movement, so too does Gray focus on a handful of individuals who made a difference. Among them are James P. Love, an American intellectual property activist; Dr. Peter Mugyenyi, head of the largest HIV treatment and research center in Uganda; Zackie Achmat, a South African AIDS activist; and Yusuf Hamied, the Indian scientist behind the socially conscious pharmaceutical manufacturer Cipla."

"Gray’s central narrative outlines the plan spearheaded by Hamied to slash the cost of generic antiretrovirals for poor countries, and provide their governments with the know-how and technology to manufacture their own drugs. When that offer found no takers at the European Commission in Brussels, Hamied and his colleagues then returned with a second proposal that eliminated all overheads, charging only for the ingredients. That step made sense purely on a humanitarian level, not an economic one.

"The wall of willful ignorance put up against this strategy by the World Health Organization, UNAIDS and by U.S. and European governments in the stranglehold of the pharmaceutical lobby is expertly outlined. But mounting political and public pressure ultimately broke the blockade.

“The film is extremely moving as it illustrates the overwhelmingly positive impact of affordable ARVs in African countries. But that uplifting chapter ends abruptly. While Big Pharma conceded the battle, the industry won the war by enlisting the World Trade Organization as its global bully to protect future profits.” (David Rooney)

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And so the battles and the wars continue, on many fronts. And stories, an infinitude, continue to be told. And, sometimes, movies get made that chronicle the victories and defeats, movies that look into abysses and stare, as well, at the empyrean; movies which become part of the chronicle itself. Let’s hope many of us get to see this one.

JV

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