

Watching as a Country Remembers Its Nightmares

By B. RUBY RICH

THE sunny kitchen here could not be further from the South African homes and hearing rooms where Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann filmed their new documentary, "Long Night's Journey Into Day: South Africa's Search for Truth and Reconciliation." Yet it's in this very kitchen that it all began. "You were reading the first newspaper account of the testimonies over by the counter," Ms. Reid recalls. "No, not there," Ms. Hoffmann says. "I'm sure I was over here, sitting at the table and drinking coffee." Then they laugh at the incongruity of such a disagreement from a pair of filmmakers who have spent the past three years fixated on nothing but memory, documenting the remarkable process for remembering institutionalized by South Africa in its Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

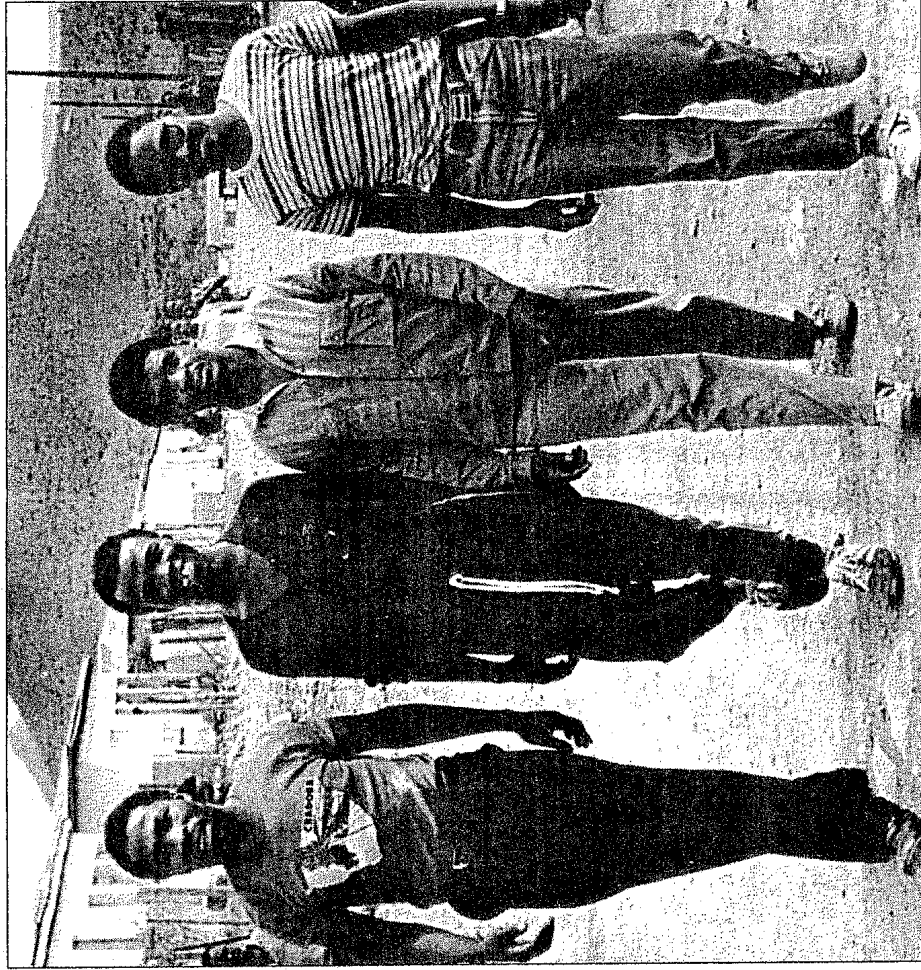
Ms. Hoffmann first read an account of the commission's hearings in the American press. She didn't think before saying, "Someone should make a film about this!" Then came a silence, then a sinking feeling. She realized Ms. Reid had risen to the bait, and no amount of pleading could talk her out of it. Two months later, as the two walked on a beach in Capetown with a South African friend, Ms. Hoffmann was still protesting: "Not us! I didn't mean us!"

Between 1997 and 1999, the filmmakers would make eight trips to South Africa, spending a full six months there. They filmed the hearings and interviewed victims, perpetrators and officials of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. What captivated them were the stories.

"We made it like kids making their first film," Ms. Reid admits. "You just jump in. We had no idea how overwhelming and daunting it would turn out to be." They weren't novices, though. Both received Academy Award nominations in 1995. Ms. Reid for her documentary "Straight From the Heart" and Ms. Hoffmann for her documentary "Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter." With long lists of awards and 50 years of documentary experience between them, they nevertheless chose to sidestep common sense and take on another culture a half a world away. "We knew we had the chance to witness something historic," Ms. Hoffmann says.

The key to their approach is a steadfast, unblinking emphasis on individual moral tales. They limit four such tales to stand for the reconciliation commission's task of sifting memories for truths, a process so controversial that South African public opinion remains divided. One tale tells the story of Amy Biehl, a young American woman who went to South Africa on a fellowship and was murdered in the Capetown township of Gugulethu in 1993 on the day before her return to the United States. Another portrays Eric Taylor, a remorseful white security forces officer who sought amnesty for his part in the 1985 killing of the young men who came to be known as the Cradock Four. He agreed to appear on camera over the objections of his lawyer.

B. Ruby Rich is the author of "Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement."



Colin Urquhart

In "Long Night's Journey Into Day," Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann, left, follow cases like that of Matthew Goniwe and Fort Calata, seen in 1984 at right and second from right above, two of the victims of the Cradock Four massacre in 1985.



Jean Bonhoff

and a former member of the commission's Human Rights Violations Committee, Ms. Reid and Ms. Hoffmann stood out from the pack. "What was unique was their desire to be intimate," he said. "Unlike other journalists, they were there at every moment, going back to individuals, listening to their stories, understanding who they are. The film shows that they did something special. It captures most profoundly the essence of what the T.R.C. was all about."

It was this human approach that convinced Diane Weyermann of the Soros Documentary Fund to be the first to back the filmmakers financially. "We are so used to seeing such topics dealt with by the news media in some type of 'blip' coverage that doesn't go into depth," she said. "We don't feel it. That's why powerful storytelling is so crucial."

And stories they have, uncommon stories of unbearable suffering and unprecedented reconciliation. The film's intense chronicle of the commission has engendered surprising reactions from audiences. At this year's Sundance Film Festival, where it won the grand jury prize for best documentary, audiences focused on the story of Peter and Linda Biehl, Amy's parents and the film's only Americans. While it is not unusual for documentary audiences to identify most strongly with figures who seem familiar, Ms. Reid and Ms. Hoffmann hoped for more. They expected audiences to take South Africans to heart, too.

At the Berlin Film Festival, where "Long Night's Journey" won both the peace prize and the Berliner Zeitung newspaper readers' jury award, the sympathetic figure turned out to be Eric Taylor. Ms. Hoffmann remembers, "It was the remorseful white perpetrator with whom the German audience identified." One of their friends was seated next to an elderly woman who wept copiously. At the end, she apologized. It's an emotional film, he told her, that's O.K. "No, you don't understand," said the shaken woman. "I come from East Germany and I worked for the Stasi. This is the first time I've ever told anyone."

If "The Long Night's Journey Into Day" has become, as Ms. Reid suggests, "a Rorschach test," then its screenings may end up replicating the passion of the reconciliation commission dramas. Its first theatrical run begins on Wednesday at Film Forum. A South African distributor is poised to take it to the townships in the fall. An invitation has arrived from the Jerusalem Film Festival.

With their filming long over, Ms. Hoffmann and Ms. Reid now find themselves engaged in a whole new round of inquiries, this time into the hearts and souls of their audiences.

Two American documentarians follow personal tales of pain told before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.