

Profile

Staffan Hildebrand: film maker who charts the spread of AIDS

One cold winter day in 1987, Staffan Hildebrand was summoned to the office of Hans Wigzell, President of the Karolinska Institutet in Sweden. Hildebrand, already a cult figure in Sweden for his controversial youth documentaries, had made a film about AIDS in 1986. But Wigzell had in mind a far vaster and more challenging project: he wanted to document the spread of the epidemic around the world for the next 30 years. Since that meeting, Hildebrand and his teams of film makers have followed HIV/AIDS to Uganda, Thailand, Brazil, France, then Russia, the Philippines, South Africa, and Nigeria—to 40 countries in total, shooting over 500 hours of film, for the “Face of AIDS” project (<http://www.faceofaids.org>).

Like a modern-day Cassandra, endowed with the power of prophecy but unable to prevent the course of fate, Hildebrand has watched the disease repeat its pattern of destruction in country after country. His films are intended as slices of frozen time, allowing future researchers to look back and see not just statistics, but how those affected thought and looked and felt at the time. The Face of AIDS team has interviewed scientists, prostitutes, community activists, and teenagers like Sergei, a former junkie who helps other adolescents in Kiev to get off drugs. So far, the team has produced 23 documentaries. One of them, *Global Youth Fighting HIV and AIDS*, opened the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok in July, 2004.

When I meet Hildebrand, he is sipping hot tea in the living room of his low-ceilinged 18th-century house in central Stockholm, which has a sweeping view of the city harbour. The style is a cross between *Architectural Digest* and college dorm room; the rooms are filled with curios from around the world and old movie posters. Hildebrand, a compact man with grey hair, tells me that there are 12 years left to go on the project, and, since he is ageing, he is handing over the reins to a group of protégés. One of them is Duong Vanneth, a 23-year-old Cambodian who has just shot his first video in Cambodia. Vanneth’s cousin died of AIDS, and he feels he is honouring her memory by his work. “He has the unlimited freedom to choose the film subjects”, says Hildebrand, “and learning the craft of a documentary film maker will give him a voice”. Vanneth wants to educate young Cambodians about the dangers of AIDS and teach them how to protect themselves. He asserts that Cambodian society is still reeling from the legacy of war. It destroyed traditional social relationships, and sexual violence is common. “Men have girlfriends but it is rare for a man to marry his girlfriend”, he says.

As well as working with teams of film makers, Hildebrand has collaborated with research organisations around the

world, among them, the Institute of Human Virology in Baltimore, MD, USA, headed by Robert Gallo. Max Essex, Chairman of the Harvard AIDS Initiative, recalls meeting Hildebrand 4 years ago at the annual AIDS meeting at the Institute. “Hildebrand showed his video to all the participants of the meeting, about 600 to 800 of them, all scientists. They were impressed with the quality of the work and his sincerity and the long-term perspective. AIDS is something that takes unexpected turns. It is a pandemic. I would say that I think it is a very valuable contribution to give young scientists perspective.” Essex also favours Hildebrand’s approach of avoiding polemics and letting people speak for themselves about the impact of HIV/AIDS on their lives.

Aside from the huge logistics issues involved in making the films, Hildebrand had to decide how to collect the raw footage so that it would be a long-lasting and accessible record, freely available to doctors and public-health researchers. The footage shot in the first 10 years is 16 mm film and the negatives are frozen in vaults. For the past 5 years he has shot in digital video. But, whereas film lasts for 100 years, digital footage has to be redigitised every 7 years to keep up with changing technical standards. The project’s technical advisers are also working on making the footage downloadable from the internet for years to come; technology changes so quickly that older versions could soon be hard to access.

While Wigzell initiated the project and Karolinska was an important collaborator, the funding has been piecemeal, film by film. Hildebrand had to find funding from governmental and other sources including the Swedish Medical Association, Swedish Association of Pharmaceutical Companies, and the Swedish industrialist Carl Bennet. Only in 2003 did the project start receiving funding to take care of the archive itself, and international funding from donors, including the US National Institutes of Health and Merck.

This year’s UN World AIDS Campaign, which culminates on Dec 1, World AIDS Day, will focus on how inequality between the sexes makes women more vulnerable to AIDS. Hildebrand’s next film is *America and AIDS—25 Years Into the Epidemic*, due for June, 2006, when the epidemic will be 25 years old. After that he plans a film about men, sexuality, power, and the spread of AIDS. A contributing factor to the spread of the epidemic is women’s subservience to men, he feels, and he wants to explore male power in the world. “Males. They exploit women. This is my thesis.”

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