

# Born Into Brothels

Reviewed by Priya Verma

While watching the Oscars last year, I saw glimpses of scenes from *Born Into Brothels*, and thought it another attempt on the part of Western filmmakers to profit from the third world's assorted miseries. When I started watching the film, however, my skepticism faded within the first 10 minutes.

The film starts with co-director Zana Briski's voice:

It's almost impossible to photograph in the red light district, everyone is terrified of the camera, and they are frightened of being found out. Everything is illegal, there is a whole separate society within itself, you just walk down that one lane and it's another world. I knew I couldn't do it as a visitor; I wanted to stay with them, live with them and understand their lives. And of course as soon as I entered the brothels, I met the children.

Briski spent several years in the red light district of Calcutta, India, to glean knowledge about the women, but as she says in her narrative, the first thing she encountered were the children of this sub-culture. She ran a photography class for the children of prostitutes, encouraging them to document anything and everything that surrounded them. She was also working on getting them into a boarding school, so that they could

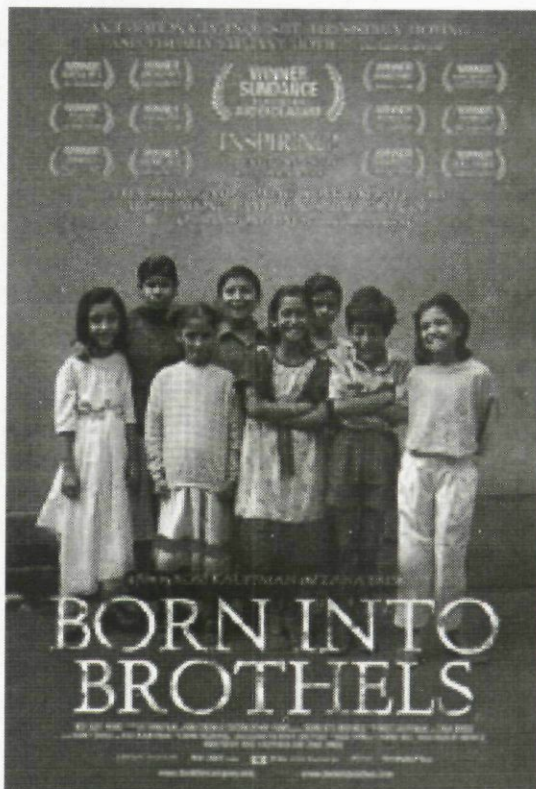
have a better surrounding to grow up in. Ignored, spurned and dismissed, a universe exists in the back alleys and brothels that is distinct from the country's mainstream. The children impress with the manner in which they capture this world through their photographs.

The seven children featured in this documentary are not only Briski's subjects, but also her collaborators, and it is thrilling to watch them discover their artistic talents. Interviews with the children show that they want a better life outside the brothel neighborhoods. The problem they face is the entrenched fatalism that exists in their families. Some parents are waiting for the day when their daughters can join "the line"—a fact spoken of frankly by the girls themselves. Others are unwilling to allow their kids to go off to a boarding school, because that would mean they will not be around to clean houses, and the family would lose an income.

The bleakness of the context, however, is interspersed with some surprising high points, like when Briski tries to get the kids into the

boarding school. Because they are children of sex workers, an HIV test is compulsory. Fortunately, all their tests are negative, which means their admission process can continue. Another emotionally satisfying point is when one of Briski's students is selected to go to Amsterdam for a photography contest.

When you begin with children being brought up in this environment, the tragedy is so obvious that it is somehow blunted. What brings the film to life is the upbeat attitude of the children, along with their hunger for a better life and that, in spite of the oppressive conditions, they still persist with joy. That alone is enough to give them a chance. ♦



Copyright of Off Our Backs is the property of Off Our Backs and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.