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‘The Rescue List’ Review: An Eye-Opening Documentary About One School’s War Against Human Trafficking in Ghana

Alyssa Fedele and Zachary Fink’s doc explores how a former child slave is working to save the 20,000th kids who are sold in Ghana each year.



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“The Rescue List”

There’s a man who sails his motorboat along the murky waters of Ghana’s Lake Volta, looking for unattended children he can lure into his craft. He wears a ratty polo shirt, and yells out to any of the young people he happens to see out there in the middle of a school day. We suspect that he means well — crisp documentaries like this one seldom begin with the filmmakers aiding and abetting anything *that* sinister — but there’s something predatory about how he strong-arm these kids into his care. And not all of them come willingly. The first proper scene of Alyssa Fedele and Zachary Fink’s “[The Rescue List](#)” ends with a harrowing slow-speed chase, an adult man sloshing through the river to catch a crying

boy and drag him back to the boat. It's only later that we can fully appreciate how he saved the boy's life.

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“The Rescue List” is short on context, but it provides enough information to set the scene: When foreign mining companies built the Akosombo Dam in 1965, they created the largest manmade lake on Earth. They *also* created a fertile breeding ground for human traffickers, who capitalized on the poverty created (or exacerbated) by the development project by paying local families to “borrow” their children for short-term work. That practice still continues today, and many of these children are never seen again (the Fedele and Fink estimate that 20,000 of them are currently enslaved to fishermen).

The man snatching children off the lake is named Stephen Kwame Addo, and he's single-mindedly dedicated to rescuing these lost boys, rehabilitating them at a non-

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governmental facility called Challenging Heights (founded by former child slave and eventual Barclays Bank manager James Kofi Annan), and then returning them to their families. The kids spend a year in Kwame's care, not only so that they can receive the basics of an education or readjust to a life that doesn't hinge on dangerous labor and regular beatings, but also so that he can question them about the friends they left behind with the fishermen. The list of names that Kwame builds from these reluctant testimonies is the only hard evidence of a crisis that appears to continue in plain sight.

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“The Rescue List”

Eye-opening and empathetic, “The Rescue List” is the kind of issue-driven doc that betters the world by mere virtue of its existence. Of course, it’s something of a backhanded compliment to suggest that a film’s value can be measured by the number of people who see it, and it’s true that

Fedele and Fink have created something that could easily be construed as an infomercial for *Challenging Heights* (albeit an unusually artful one). There are plenty of reasons why good causes tend to inspire bad documentaries, and — in its more unfocused and broadly virtuous moments — “*The Rescue List*” reminds us of them all.

The most persistent frustration: A lack of context. Racing through its 80-minute running time without much peripheral vision, this ruthlessly edited movie acknowledges all manner of issues that it doesn't have the patience to unpack. Kwame laments that the Ghanaian government is apathetic towards the country's trafficking crisis, but Fedele and Fink's immersive *vérité* style doesn't encourage him to unpack that complaint. Likewise, the (understandable) lack of footage from Kwame's rescue missions denies us the opportunity to more fully understand the dynamic between the fishermen and their slaves, or appreciate why the captors don't do more to protect their “investments” when *Challenging Heights* rolls up on their homes. Is it shame? And if so, how does their shame differ from that of the boys' parents, who sold their sons away? They may have done so under false pretenses, but this has been going on for more than 50 years, so it would seem their complicity is worth a closer

examination.

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Nevertheless, the patience and sensitivity with which “The Rescue List” renders the children themselves is remarkable. Much of the movie follows a 17-year-old named Peter who arrives at Challenging Heights after 14 years on the lake, and it’s stunning to watch him reawaken into his own humanity. When he first meets Kwame, Peter is asked if he’s happy that his mother brought him into this world — it takes him a full year to arrive at a somewhat affirmative answer. To watch his journey towards some kind of self-identity is to see someone be born again, and it’s haunting to gauge his growing awareness of the ordeal he survived, as well as the richness of the world that is still being deprived of his

friends in captivity (another boy named Edem is asked to play a more direct role in rescuing someone he knows).

Most striking of all is the pivotal role that education plays in this process. Challenging Heights may be a bit different than the average school, but few environments could better express the power of a basic education, and the infinite number of possibilities that it opens to these boys. The intensity on Kwame's face is a fine testament to that, with the former child laborer focusing his energies on the classroom with revelatory conviction. Saving defenseless kids from the cruelty of Lake Volta must be some of the most challenging work imaginable, but "The Rescue List" ultimately resonates because of how little it can take to show them their own strength.

Grade: B-

"The Rescue List" premiered at the 2018 San Francisco International Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.

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