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# Film Review: 'The Rescue List'

A hotbed of child slavery in Ghana is targeted by activists in this involving activist documentary.

By **Dennis Harvey** ▼



Courtesy of San Francisco Intl. Film Festival

For decades most Westerners thought child labor was a thing of the past, one of those bad-old-days relics left behind with the Victorian era. But economic globalization has brought new attention to myriad surviving networks of exploitation and trafficking,

many dependent on the underaged. American documentary duo [Alyssa Fedele](#) and [Zachary Fink](#)'s "The Rescue List" sheds light on one internationally little-known but persistent case in point: Children used as slaves in the fishing industry of Ghana's Lake Volta. Focusing on a rescue-and-rehabilitation organization and several youths it plucks from servitude, this is an involving indictment with enough individual human-interest elements to avoid being too much of a grim screed.

Funded by foreign mining companies, the completion of the Akosombo Dam in 1965 created the largest man-made lake on the planet. Almost immediately, traffickers began paying poor families for their children's labor in what was promised as short-term employment, but the kids were often never heard from or seen again. Half a century later, as many as 10,000 child slaves are estimated as working there, many frequently beaten by their "masters," not a few drowning when caught in fishing nets they've been ordered to disentangle in the murky waters.

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Founded by James Kofi Annan (to whom the film is dedicated), Challenging Heights uses various means to combat this phenomenon, without much help from the government — some estimate that as much as a third of the nation's youth experience some form of slave labor. We see Stephen Kwame Addo (who, like Annan, escaped such subjugation himself) stop boats and interrogate villagers to identify juveniles who've often been thus shanghaied for years. (They often have to be assured they won't be "ritually sacrificed" by rescuers, a scare tactic their owners use to prevent desertion.)

Some of those saved are sent to a rehab center in a secret rural location. There, they spend a year in dormitory-like communal circumstances going to school (usually for the first time) and being re-acclimated to freedom while their parents are hopefully tracked down. When found, the latter have to promise they won't "re-traffic" their child ever again, or face potential prosecution.

Among our youthful protagonists here are Peter, who was sold at age 3 and wasn't rescued until the brink of legal adulthood; and Edem, who is most concerned that his

friend Teye also be reclaimed from forced labor on the lake. It's a big day when the two boys are finally reunited. On the other hand, we see the evasiveness and anger of villagers who most unwillingly give up their child "investments" to Challenging Heights personnel, though no retaliatory violence is glimpsed.

Well-shot by Fink and nicely scored by William Ryan Fritch, "The Rescue List" is perhaps surprisingly easy to take given its harsh subject. The kids seem to bounce back more painlessly than one might expect from their long hardships, and we do not hear tales of sexual abuse. (There appear to be relatively few girls involved, at least in the fishing-slave arena.) It's a fine first tandem directorial effort for the San Francisco-based Fedele and Fink, both relative newbies who've variably produced, edited, and shot other people's non-fiction projects prior to this one.

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## **Film Review: 'The Rescue List'**

**Reviewed online, San Francisco, April 5, 2018. (In SFFilm, Full Frame, DocLands film festivals.) Running time: 81 MIN.**

**Production:** (Documentary – U.S.-Ghana) A Collective Hunch production. (International sales: Ro\*co Films, Sausalito, Calif.) Producers: Alyssa Fedele, Zachary Fink, Davis Coombe. Executive producer: Steve James.

**Crew:** Directors: Alyssa Fedele, Zachary Fink. Camera (color, HD): Fink. Editors: Fedele, Davis Coombe. Music: William Ryan Fritch.

**With:** Stephen Kwame Addo, Teye Adi, Edem Akpalu, Peter Samuel, Bernice Jaama Akromah, Peter Kwesi Smyth. (Twi, Ewe, Fante, Effutu, Ada, English dialogue)

**Music By:**

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