

TV GUIDE

Full Review - Iraq In Fragments

Tragically, the title of James Longley's beautifully shot 90-minute documentary refers to not only the state in which he found the Iraq during the two years he spent there shooting over 300 hours of footage, but the structure the violent factionalism that divides Iraqi Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds imposes on his film. Ironically, dividing his work into the three equal but very separate fragments seems to be the only way Longley can talk about Iraq as a whole. In the first segment, "Mohammed of Baghdad," Longley closely follows Mohammed Haithem, an 11-year-old boy whose father disappeared during Saddam's brutally repressive regime. Mohammed works for his uncle, a mechanic whose smile barely conceals a mean streak that often reduces Mohammed to tears. Living among Sunnis, Shiites and U.S. soldiers in the mixed Sheik Omar neighborhood of Baghdad, Mohammed's anxiety is palpable — in a shy voice-over, he recalls a once beautiful city that is now ruined and scary &\$151; as is the frustration among the neighborhood men, none of whom have any illusions about this brave new democracy. The workers will stay workers, and only the rich will ever benefit from reconstruction. In the tense second fragment, "Sadr's South," Longely travels between the holy city of Najaf and Naseryiah and gets frighteningly close to the inner workings of the political movement that has sprung up around the Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr as members attempt to thwart the upcoming national elections and an "occupation appointed council" with a regional vote held under the supervision of religious leaders. With a religious stringency reminiscent of the Taliban, armed members of the so-called Mehdi Army storm a local market and brutally "arrest" anyone suspected of selling alcohol. Some applaud the action, while others understandably fear that with the rise of the Sadr movement, one oppressor has simply replaced another. In the third and final episode, "Kurdish Spring," Longely journeys to northern Iraq to film life among Iraqi Kurds. Unlike the voices heard in the first two fragments, many Kurds enthusiastically welcome the arrival of the coalition forces — "God brought America to the Kurds," one proclaims — and they hope the upcoming elections moves them one step closer to the long-dreamt-of Kurdish homeland. Young Suleiman has a more immediate dream: He hopes to one day finish school, attend college and become a doctor, but he must spend his days tending the family sheep or working at the brick foundries that dot the landscape. As thrilling as "Sadr's South" may be to watch, Longely's real strength lies in his ability to draw from the observances of children, a talent shown to tremendous effect in his 2002 documentary, GAZA STRIP. It's no surprise that his first and third fragments should finally be the most powerful; it's through Mohammed and Suleiman that we experience a common humanity that rises above religious factions and ethnic divisions. (In Arabic and Kurdish, with English subtitles.) --*Ken Fox*