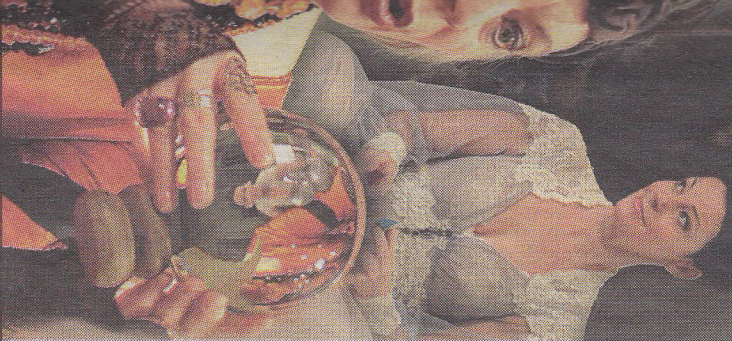


'Hermione Norris...
OUTSTANDING'

Guardian

'Ruthie Henshall...
IRRESISTIBLE'

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Sweet charity

An avowed cynic, Kevin Maher can't stand campaigning films; so what happened when he hosted one at his sons school?

SUCCESS STORY
Chris Mburu, below, and, above, Hilde Back, the donor who gave the education fund its name



It was Oscar Wilde, typically, who said that "A little sincerity is a dangerous thing". And he hadn't even seen *The Age of Stupid*, *An Inconvenient Truth* or *The End of the Line*. For the latter movies, all campaigning documentaries designed to save the world from impending apocalypse, have become touchstone works for a new breed of activist filmmaker that aspires to tangible goals and is fuelled, above all else, by breast-beating sincerity. Their world view is summed up best by the kindly folk of *A Small Act*, a new campaigning documentary about childhood poverty in Kenya that describes how the world's huge sociopolitical problems can be affected by the tiniest personal gesture. In short, sign up. Give money. Solve problem. End of story.

Personally, I can't stand these docs. They are mostly axiomatic and repetitive, formally inert and an insult to anyone who believes in the artistic power of the medium (or who even believes in excellent documentaries — from *The Thin Blue Line* to *Man on Wire*). They often feature a roll call of well-meaning spuds who announce to camera that the world is going to Hell because of X (for X insert fossil fuels, overfishing, the effects of supercapitalism, or even the disappearance of honey bees), and who then treat us to 85 minutes of doom-laden prognostica-

tions that culminate in a final-reel volte-face in which the impending apocalypse can indeed be averted if we join this website, sign this petition or attend this public meeting. *The Age of Stupid* played out this paradox in extremis by setting itself in a post-apocalyptic dystopia and then essentially announcing at the last minute: "Only joking! You're all fine for now! Or are you?"

I take my issues to Anna Godas, CEO of Dogwoof Films, and distributor of many of the central campaigning documentaries (including *The Age of Stupid* and *The End of the Line*). We discuss the ostensible tension between the need to campaign for social change and the need to make documentary art. She says that Dogwoof never champions standard products, and yet, even within its remit, "there are films that maybe have 20 minutes in the middle that aren't that great. But, nonetheless, there is a massive campaign that we can build around them, and the weak bit isn't that crap that it'll put people off". This sounds about right. The campaigning doc: passionate social message with crap bits in the middle.

The debate, however, isn't over yet. Dogwoof believes so fervently in its new documentaries that it is turning regular Joe and Joanna Citizen into mini-exhibitors. With the "ambassadors programme", Dogwoof is capitalising on the nationwide theatrical release of its films (and the media atten-

tion that this creates) by allowing signed-up "ambassadors" to sit in a cinema and screen their new releases wherever they like — bedroom or barn-house, the choice is yours. Naturally, and hoping to pop this particular balloon once and for all, I sign up.

The film I'm screening is, appropriately enough, *A Small Act*. I ask my sons school if I can screen it in the theatre on a midweek night. It says yes. An e-mail goes round the parents and, courtesy of Dogwoof, the time and place appears on Twitter and Facebook. In the meantime, I watch the movie on DVD. It describes the story of Chris Mburu, a penniless Kenyan child who is anonymously sponsored by Hilde Back, a kindly Swedish teacher, and becomes a Harvard-educated human rights advocate. In adult life Mburu tracks down the octogenarian Back to thank her, and to celebrate the charity begun in her name — the Hilde Back Education Fund. The film follows the intertwining tales of Mburu and Back's lives (she, it transpires, is a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany) as well as the fortunes of three young Kenyan students who are hoping to snag a scholarship that will change their lives for ever. It is, scanning it alone on DVD, as expected, passionate and campaigning, with a few crap bits in the middle (Mburu repeats himself a lot).

I meet Jennifer Arnold, the director of *A Small Act*, before my screening. She is, bizarrely, on my side. "I don't think any filmmaker are under any obligation to change the world, and to me that wasn't the goal of this film," she says before explaining how *A Small Act* — made with only one camera, two light stands and no money — became a campaigning film despite itself. When it played at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010 the audience members were so moved that they donated \$90,000 in cash and cheques right there on the spot. "So because of what happened at Sundance we thought, 'OK, we better get something

together, because this film affects people, I then call Mburu himself, who is in Burundi. I ask him what he expects movie to achieve. "I hope that it affords people the realisation that a small lead to a positive, that it can change a nation that needs changing." He adds that he is not naive, and not expecting social charity to solve problems with political roots. "Although people can, in any way they can, the government not be let off the hook. There has been pressure on governments. And in Kenya the pressure to provide the right education. Because it is a right, not a privilege. More than 100 people turn up screening. I introduce the film, and them that I'm a bit apathetic about whole subject. The film starts. At something remarkable happens. Elsewhere, there in the darkness, the elbow, becomes magnificent. Mburu's story and the life debt that he owes a tiny resilient woman is inspiring and fably moving. And the plight of the Kenyan children touches special with an audience of parents whose day existence is so permanently affected by the needs of the young. And even the bits in the middle — the repetition loose shots — are merely evidence of passion from a filmmaker who scratches his story together against the odds. The film ends. There are tears. I an unobtrusive basket by the door filled, within seconds, with \$55. I do money off the next day to the Hilde Back Education Fund in Kenya. Mburu says this reaction is not unique. Because screenings so far, in Sundance and HBO, "We've been able to expand the actions of our fund to focus not on one area but on four entire districts in the country. This is a giant leap for us, and we sustain it, and to keep the kids going time education." I hope it will make a difference. I want it to change the world. I am changed. Sincerely,

A Small Act is in cinemas from Friday. To find out more about Dogwoof, become an ambassador, please visit dogwoof.com; good with film.com

The audience at Sundance were so moved by A Small Act that they donated \$90,000 on the spot

