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Wisconsin Film Festival: Well-intentioned 'Rhythmic Uprising' lacks cohesion

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In 'Rhythmic Uprising,' groups in Bahia, Brazil use art to celebrate Afro-Brazilians culture in a peaceful and positive way. - Promotional

A thunderous, rhythmic pounding could be heard emanating from the Fredric March Play Circle theater. Had the University of Wisconsin Memorial Union gone a little overboard and equipped the charmingly dinky theater with a THX sound system?

Nope, it was live, not Memorex. Prior to Friday night's screening of "Rhythmic Uprising," members of the Madison drumming group Handphibians and three dancers from Massamba Dance Company took to the stage to pull off a little percussive revolution of their own. As the eight or nine drummers laid down galvanizing, complex rhythms, the three dancers shimmied and swayed with exuberant precision.

It was quite a stunning surprise and a reminder of how powerful a beautiful sound can be. In Bahia -- a Brazilian state that has an 80 percent African population, most of which lives in abject poverty -- that sound has done more than moved them to dance. It has moved them to band together and act.

"Rhythmic Uprising" documents some of the groups in Bahia that are seizing up the idea of a peaceful and positive "revolution of the arts," celebrating their Afro-Brazilian heritage as a way to lift the spirits of young people and band them together.

The final cut of the movie had its world premiere at this year's film festival, and its heart certainly is in the right place. The various groups -- including a circus, a martial arts/dance group, and an all-girl drum corps -- are interesting and inspiring.

But director Benjamin Watkins -- who attended the screening with his co-producer and wife, Eliciana Nascimento -- unwittingly hit on the central problem with the film: it's too scattered, with no real narrative thread to hold it together. Watkins originally made a film just about the different groups, basically to help them get publicity, and each segment feels like an infomercial (his word) for a group.

Then Watkins got feedback that his film didn't explain many of the larger issues surround Brazil's class struggle and the origins of Afro-Brazilian culture, so he went back and spent another year in Brazil shooting footage about that. That makes up the second half of the movie, but it's an awkward fit with the institution video-style first half.

It's too late now, but the film would have benefited if Watkins had gone back to the editing room and totally rethought the structure of his film, integrating both the broader cultural themes and the specific group profiles together into more of a coherent story. He might have even considered following just one of the groups; I could easily see a great movie being made just about the drum corps made up of teenage girls. As it stands, "Rhythmic Uprising" is partially undone by its own good intentions.