

*If you come to Jamaica as a tourist,
This is what you will see...*

“A must-see film”

-Michael M. Thomas, NY Observer

“Powerful”

-Stephen Holden, The New York Times



A Film by
STEPHANIE BLACK

Cinematography by
**MALIK SAYEED, KYLE KIBBE,
RICHARD LANNAMAN &
ALEX NEPOMNIASCHY**

Edited by
JOHN MULLEN

Assistant Producer
SARAH MANLEY

Narration Written by
JAMAICA KINCAID
(based on “A Small Place”)

Original Music by
MUTABARUKA

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One Love, One Heart, Or a Sweatshop Economy?

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN

The term "globalization" is so tinged with rosy one-world optimism that it's easy to assume the essential benignity of an economic philosophy whose name vaguely connotes unity, equality and freedom. But as Stephanie Black's powerful documentary "Life and Debt" illustrates with an impressive (and depressing) acuity, globalization can have a devastating impact on third world countries. The movie offers the clearest analysis of globalization and its negative effects that I've ever seen on a movie or television screen.

"Life and Debt," which opens the Human Rights Watch Film Festival this evening at the Walter Reade Theater and continues its run on Saturday at Cinema Village, focuses on the deeply troubled economy of Jamaica and how that country's long-term indebtedness to international lending organizations have contributed to the erosion of local agriculture and industry.

Far from being a dry exegesis crammed with graphs, pie charts and talking heads spewing abstract mumbo-jumbo, the film goes directly to the farmers and factory workers whose livelihoods have

Jamaica as the prey of global economic forces.

been undermined. In basic everyday language, they explain how high interest rates have helped devalue the local currency, raising prices for their produce and permitting wealthier countries to import the same products and sell them more cheaply.

The hard-nosed lending policies of organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank may not deliberately set out to undermine fragile third world economies dependent on their aid. But as the movie shows, the market forces that operate once these organizations become involved are an economic form of Darwinism. The fittest economies prosper while the weaker ones tend to be snared in an endless and escalating cycle of debt repayment that eventually erodes the debtor country's economic base. The banks' lending policies are, of course, determined by the wealthier countries, especially the United States and those of Western Europe.

These dry economic realities are leavened by the cool, ironic lyricism of a voice-over narration by Jamaica Kincaid, who adapted the text from her nonfiction book, "A Small Place." Adopting the alluringly soothing tone of a subversive tour guide, Ms. Kincaid

informs potential tourists of the things that will be hidden from sight should they visit Jamaica.

"When you sit down to eat your delicious meal, it's better that you don't know that most of what you are eating came off a ship from Miami," she says.

That's just one of a long list of things she mentions -- from primitive hotel sewage systems that empty directly into the ocean to the dire poverty of Kingston's slums -- that all but the most intrepidly curious visitors to the country will not see. Recurring through the film are unsettling images of jolly, overfed American tourists engaged in activities like beer-drinking contests in Jamaica's luxury hotels.

One result of the country's crumbling economy is the vulnerability to exploitation of Jamaica's needy labor force. A segment about Jamaica's free trade zones introduces us to workers who toil five or six days a week in near-sweatshop conditions for the legal minimum wage of \$30 a week sewing garments for American manufacturers. No unionization is permitted in these foreign-owned garment factories where shiploads of material arrive tax-free for assembly before being transported back to foreign markets. Those who dare to make waves are fired.

The movie visits a plant that used to sell high-quality chickens for Jamaican consumption but whose business has been undermined by the dumping of cheaper, low-grade chicken parts from the United States under the guise of free trade. And until recently, Jamaica's banana industry flourished thanks to an agreement with Britain allowing a tax-free import quota. But through the World Trade Organization, the United States has protested the agreement, forcing Jamaica to compete with multinational corporations based in Central and South America where labor is cheaper.

These are just a few of the stories told in a film that despite all the bad news it delivers refuses to raise its voice. Among the prominent Jamaicans interviewed the most eloquent voice belongs to Michael Manley, the former prime minister who reluctantly signed some of the agreements that have damaged the country's economy.

Speaking more in sorrow than in anger, he acknowledges that his country made mistakes along the way. But the overall impression left by this devastating film is of the global economy as a dog-eat-dog world where the usual culprits, the United States and its multinational corporate clients, have the advantage.