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Sundance Documentaries Transform Data Into Stories

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A scene from "The House I Live In," directed by Eugene Jarecki.

Over the weekend, "The House I Live In," Eugene Jarecki's heart-heavy investigation into the American war on drugs, nabbed the grand jury prize for documentary at the Sundance Film Festival. Mr. Jarecki's other movies include "The Trials of Henry Kissinger," about you know who, and a 2005 grand jury prize winner, "Why We Fight," about the American military industrial complex. Notably, one of this year's jury members was Charles Ferguson, whose documentaries include "No End in Sight" and "Inside Job," and who, like Mr. Jarecki, has a methodological gift for transforming boatloads of information into both political arguments and eminently watchable narratives.

Mr. Jarecki's new documentary takes its title from the song, memorably crooned by both Paul Robeson and Frank Sinatra, which compares America with a house we - "all races and religions" - live in. As Mr. Jarecki explains in his voiceover, he came to his latest subject through his relationship with Nannie Jeter, an African-American who worked for his (white) family when he was young. After the drug-related death of her son, Mr. Jarecki found himself wondering what drugs had done to Ms. Jeter's family, a question that quickly found him, as he tells it here, shifting his focus from drugs, their uses and abuses, to the war on drugs.

Among the other Sundance documentaries that stirred up interest and noise the most disappointing was Amy Berg's "West of Memphis," her look at the West Memphis Three. In brief, the three men - Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley Jr. - had been, until their release in August, doing time for the 1993 murder of three 8-year-old boys in the Arkansas town of West Memphis. In their 1996 documentary "Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills" and two subsequent movies, Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky helped to stir doubts about the convictions, becoming part of the campaign to free the three. (Mr. Berlinger's and Mr. Sinofsky's third movie, "Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory," has been nominated for an Oscar.)

It's unclear what Ms. Berg and her patrons - the director Peter Jackson and his wife, the producer Fran Walsh - thought that another movie about the case would add to the cinematic record. There's some fine material here, but the documentary revisits familiar terrain and leans too hard on insinuation, as with the suggestion that some prosecutorial players used the original trial for (surprise) political gain. Unfortunately, Ms. Berg doesn't dig into the politics and instead meanders here and there in a documentary that has too much Eddie Vedder (a West Memphis Three supporter) and, like Mr. Berlinger and Mr. Sinofsky's work, includes too many crime-scene photos of three naked, hogtied children whose deaths can register as a filmmaking afterthought.