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Strong topics are popular fare

by John Hartl
Times film reviewer

Documentaries that express a strong point of view show up less frequently these days on the increasingly timid Public Broadcasting System. But they're alive and thriving at film festivals.



"Miss or Myth?" which plays at 4 p.m. tomorrow at the Market Theater, as part of the 12th Seattle International Film

Festival, is an unsettling nonfiction film about sexism in Santa Cruz, where feminists have been protesting the Miss California Pageant for several years — and mounting their own anti-beauty-contest, the Myth California Pageant.

The co-directors, Mark Schwartz and Geoffrey Dunn, move back and forth between black-and-white footage of such past contestants as Karen Valentine (who sings an excruciatingly cutesy version of "Wouldn't You Like to Meet a Sweet Old-Fashioned Girl?") and interviews with outraged feminists and defensive pageant supporters.

What's disturbing is the lack of an eloquent spokesman on either side. There's a steady exchange of opinions, yet neither the emotionalism of the feminists nor the uptight conservatism of the pageant-presenters is likely to sway anyone. The result is a unique portrait of moral and social confusion.

"The International Sweethearts of Rhythm," which shares the bill tomorrow, is a spirited little movie about a multiracial all-women's jazz band of the 1940s. It was co-directed by Greta Schiller, in the chatty, affectionate style of her 1985 gay-rights documentary, "Before Stonewall." There are plenty of interviews with survivors of the

experience who simply glow when they talk about the good times the group had together. Yet there's a dark side to their story — their battles with segregation and male chauvinism — that is told with considerable poignancy.

"Chile: Hasta Cuando?", which won an Oscar nomination and a couple of prizes at the United States Film Festival in January, makes its local debut at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Market.

The awards are well-deserved. This is a shocking film about government-ordered torture and murder and General Pinochet's abuse of power in Chile since the military coup of the early 1970s. Australian director/producer Da-

vid Bradbury took his camera into the streets and captured the opposition in action. In one heartbreaking scene, the 14-year-old son of a martyred Chilean gives a sad, eloquent speech in praise of his father's quest for justice. The film is dedicated to those who risked their lives to tell their stories for the camera.

Also on the program is an American documentary, "Sanctuary: A Question of Conscience," that gives a historical overview of the plight of Central American refugees.