



Yeshi's tale worthy, tangled

Michael O'Sullivan *The Washington Post* | **Posted: Thursday, January 5, 2012 12:00 am**

"My Reincarnation" is a fascinating, if inexpertly told, yarn. Its narrative flaws aren't enough to ruin the documentary by filmmaker Jennifer Fox, but they do weaken its power.

Part of the problem is built into the subject matter. Jumping around in time via two decades of footage, and covering multiple transmigrations of souls over at least three generations, "My Reincarnation" centers on Yeshi, the worldly, Italian-born son of exiled Tibetan Buddhist master Chogyal Namkhai Norbu.

The film is mostly the story of Yeshi's struggle to come to terms with the determination by Tibetan Buddhist elders that he is the reincarnation of his father's late uncle and former teacher, Khyentse. He died in Tibet, 10 years before Yeshi was born, while in detention by the invading Chinese. (Norbu himself is considered a Rinpoche, which is a Tibetan term of respect, meaning "precious one," and identifying him as an incarnation of a lama, or spiritual teacher.)

Got all that? Good, because I had to do 10 minutes of Internet research after watching the movie, just to tie up loose ends left by the movie's imprecise timeline. At one point, "My Reincarnation" appears to suggest that Yeshi's great-uncle Khyentse might not have died until after the boy was born. (In fact, Khyentse died in 1960; Yeshi was born in 1970).

On-screen titles pop up identifying scenes - shot in Italy, Massachusetts, Russia and elsewhere - as taking place, variously, in "1989," "six years later," "one year later," etc. But after a while, it's easy to forget where exactly we are in the time-space continuum.

It doesn't help that Yeshi talks about having dreams - not about his past life, as it turns out, but about the future. One such scene, set during a visit by Yeshi to his father's homeland, shows him recalling an earlier vision he had about just such a trip.

Maybe it's intentional. After all, belief in reincarnation is based on the premise that this life - or series of lives - is impermanent and illusory. There are plenty of such deep thoughts sprinkled throughout the film, along with a compelling story line about the relationship between a distant father - compassionate and wise to his students, but emotionally unavailable to his family - and his headstrong son.

That alone is a story worth telling. Fox's narrative skills may need sharpening, but the contours of the drama are still visible. "My Reincarnation" is a watchable, if frustrating, account of one man's resistance to his fate and his ultimate acceptance of it.

Review

My Reincarnation

**

- Not rated. Contains nothing objectionable. In Italian, Tibetan and heavily accented English with English subtitles.
- Director: Jennifer Fox.
- Running time: 100 minutes.