



My Reincarnation

(Documentary – Germany-Switzerland-Netherlands-Finland)

By RICHARD KUIPERS

A Long Shot Factory (in U.S.) release of a Zohe Film Prods., Hartley Film Foundation, Impact Partners, ZDF-Arte, RSI-Televisione Svizzera, Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation, YLE-1 production in association with Lichtblick Film, Ventura Film, Vivo Film. (International sales: Cat & Docs, Paris.) Produced by Jennifer Fox. Executive producers, Dan Cogen, Andrian Melnikov, Joanna Plafsky. Co-producers, Babeth M. VanLoo, Carl Ludwig Rettinger, Andres Pfaeffli, Elda Guidinetti, Marta Donzelli, Gregorio Paonessa. Co-executive producers David Haas, Mark Farrington, Steve Landsberg, Efremer Marder. Directed by Jennifer Fox. With: Cheogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, Yeshi Namkhai. (English, Italian, Tibetan, Spanish dialogue)

The complex relationship between exiled Tibetan spiritual master Cheogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and his Italian-born son Yeshi is examined in the fascinating docu "My Reincarnation." Filmed by dedicated helmer Jennifer Fox over a 20-year period, pic offers absorbing insights into Buddhist philosophies and a compelling study of Yeshi's long and difficult process of recognizing himself as a reincarnated lama and continuing in his father's footsteps. Co-funded by the Dutch Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation but never preachy, this well-travelled festival item is ideal pubcaster material and has upscale niche potential. Theatrical waters will be tested with an Oct. 28 release in Gotham.

Following her Sundance grand jury prize-winning docu "Beirut: The Last Home Movie" (1987), Fox acted as secretary to Cheogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche (hereafter referred to as Norbu) from 1988-92 and filmed moments from his work and family life just for the record.

Early footage of Norbu and Yeshi makes sense of Fox's decision to keep the camera rolling for the next two decades. Aged 18 in 1988, Yeshi has an uneasy relationship with Norbu, a teacher of the esoteric Dzogchen system whose open, funny and very non-guru-like presence is in great demand internationally and at his learning center in Merigar in Tuscany.

Told since the age of 5 that he is the reincarnation of the Khyentse Rinpoche Chokyi Wangchuk, his father's uncle and a great spiritual master, Yeshi says he has not received the "proofs" and feels burdened by expectations placed upon him. "Everybody knows about me, but no one knows me," he comments, adding that he'd like to pursue a career in music or photography.

Picking up 13 years later, the docu finds Yeshi married and making his mark in the corporate world while his father has become seriously ill. With expert editing by Sabine Krayenbuhl ("Mad Hot Ballroom," "My Architect"), the middle section elegantly intertwines Norbu's thoughts on life and death, the fundamental importance of dreams, and the notion of impermanence in Buddhism with Yeshi's very first stirrings of an awakening. Open-minded viewers are likely to be enthralled by interpretations of human existence and systems of belief that never play like a recruitment drive.

The path by which Yeshi finds his calling and merges it harmoniously with his work and "other" life supplies the docu with a highly engaging final third. The emotional currents running through Yeshi's revitalized relationship with Norbu, and the role played by his Italian mother, Rosa, are particularly satisfying.

Filmed on low-end Hi-8 and the more sophisticated DV format, pic is a little rough around the edges, but if anything, this enhances the intimate feel of the project. A lovely score by Jan Tilman Schade with the assistance of Moe Jaksch is discreetly applied. All other technical aspects are pro.

Camera (color, Hi-8, DV-to-HD), Fox; editor, Sabine Krayenbuhl; music, Jan Tilman Schade, Moe Jaksch; sound (stereo), Tony Volante; associate producers, Eme Ato, Shelly Helgeson, Adella Ladjevardi, Thiago Melzer, Soledad Suarez, Sam Bruce, Kerthy Fix, Nicole Esquibel, Samten Ling, Francesca Zanza. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival (Take Me on a Journey), June 17, 2011. (Also in Hot Docs Film Festival; 2010 Intl. Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam.) Running time: 100 MIN.