

## Couple turn lens on pop culture

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The Gazette

Irene Angelico and Abbey Neidik spent the last four years making four films and raising their baby son. It was a grind. "And the miracle of it is that we're Still married," says Angelico, whose radiant smile covers any trace of stress.

The miracle is also that the Montreal film-makers get to reap the fruits of all their labours this week. Their four Films are being showcased at the Montreal World Film Festival, and their 4- year-old son, Tobin, has made it into pre-school.

Angelico directed and Neidik produced **The Cola Conquest** , an exhaustive and illuminating trilogy that explores the origins and impact of Coca-Cola. Following its fest screenings next week, the series will be broadcast on CBC-TV Sept. 7, 8 and 9 at 9 p.m.

The couple switched roles on **The Love Prophet and the Children of God**, a harrowing documentary about charismatic but controversial evangelist David Berg. Neidik directed and Angelico produced this film, on today and tomorrow at the fest.

Angelico and Neidik are probably best known for the award-winning **Dark Lullabies**, a poignant documentary that delves into the effects of the Holocaust on the children of survivors.

Whereas **Dark Lullabies** was an intensely personal odyssey toward discovery for Angelico, the child of a Holocaust survivor, **The Cola Conquest** was born more out of curiosity for - pardon the pun - pop culture.

She's not sure whether Coca-Cola, which is essentially 99-per-cent sweetened water, is "the real thing," but she is sure that it is the most recognizable brand name in the world.

Despite inroads made by Pepsi-Cola, Coke still outsells it two to one. Yet Coke honchos won't rest until they are able to convince the remaining 3 billion people on the planet who still prefer coffee, tea or water to their beverage.

"Coca-Cola is the perfect metaphor for America" Angelico say& "It is everywhere."

Although the trilogy is not lacking for archival footage or historical background, Angelico claims the Coca-Cola brass tried to block her at every turn.

"Half my time spent as producer on the project was dealing with lawyers to see what we could or could not use," Neidik says. "Pepsi-Cola, on the other hand, was much more open with us."

Angelico counters, "It's easier to pass judgment on the government than a secretive corporation." She had been tempted to make a fourth instalment in the series: on the nutritional value of Coke.

"But our intention was never to go after Coca-Cola," Angelico continues. "We merely wanted to look at their influence on America and the world." And on that level, they have certainly succeeded.

Angelico, never a soft-drink fancier, does wish she could slurp back the original Coca-Cola, the beverage concocted more than 100 years ago that was first marketed as a brain tonic - and whose contents included cocaine. "Though they stopped using cocaine a few years later, they're so protective of their image that they won't acknowledge it ever, having been an ingredient," Neidik says.

## **CULT LEADER PROFILED**

Drugs feature more prominently in Neidik's doc *The Love Prophet*.

Berg, the spooky and kooky religious leader whose life is chronicled in the film, first rose to prominence in California in the hazy, crazy '60s by making converts of drug-addled hipsters.

The movement, simply called the Family, then grew by leaps and bounds around the world, taking in more than 350,000 members over the next two decades. And Berg grew increasingly bizarre as he interpreted the teachings of the Bible to suit his own sordid interests. This gave him carte blanche in the boudoir to enact whatever fantasies he wished with grateful female members of his flock. This, in turn, had parents alarmed and governments desperate to crack the cult.

"What fascinated me most was how people could follow religious leaders without questioning their teachings, and how these leaders start believing their own lies," Neidik says.

"The implications are frightening, and you almost wonder if conventional religions started out on this level as well."

"The members of the Family thought Berg (who died four years ago) was like God speaking to them. As a result, he felt he had the absolute power to do whatever he wanted with them."

This is not just hearsay. Almost astonishingly, given the nature of cults, both current and former members of the Family allowed Neidik and his crew into their lives and were most forthcoming - almost too much at times.

### **PROJECT'ORDAINED'**

"They were a little leery at first, but then they said they had a revelation that our film had been ordained," Neidik says.

"I wish Coca-Cola had had the same revelation, too," Angelico cracks. "It would have made our lives a lot easier."