

CULTURE

HOME SAFE REVEALS THE RECESSION'S IMPACT, SHOWS HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT

By Amanda Connon-Unda, Culture Editor

AS THE LIGHTS dimmed at the Revue Cinema in Toronto on October 8 the audience went silent. Laura Sky's latest film called *Home Safe Toronto* started playing. Serene yet emotive music filled the dark room as the SkyWorks Charitable Foundation logo crossed the screen.

Laura Sky is my former boss, so I know her organization well. Sky started SkyWorks after she left the NFB, in order to produce her own films about social issues. Sky's films aren't necessarily destined to be broadcast (although sometimes they are), but instead her films are funded through NGOs, government agencies and private donors. They are made in consultation with community participants who give feedback and consent along the way. Her films are eventually toured as feature length documentaries across the country. It's a process that drastically

departs from the broadcasting model, whereby independent producers are beholden to broadcasters' audience and marketability considerations, budgets and deadlines.

Home Safe Toronto is a very timely film which was being researched both prior to the recession and in the wake of the recession being thrown about incessantly in the media. In the film, Sky and her executive co-producer Cathy Crowe reveal that homelessness is becoming a new reality today for more working families. As the manufacturing sector has weakened due to recent restructuring, housing insecurity is becoming more common.

Home Safe is a national film series that has several editions. It features what's happening to children and their parents facing housing insecurity or homelessness in four cities across the country. *Home Safe Toronto* reveals what's happening to families in the G.T.A.

According to recent city statistics, in April there were almost 1200 families living in homeless shelters in downtown Toronto. Meanwhile more than 70,000 households were on the waiting list for affordable housing.

Cathy Crowe, a street nurse and co-producer of *Home Safe Toronto*, explained the objective of their film. "It was to witness family homelessness - to make it visible," she said. "But [we wanted] to go beyond the stereotype... To show that [homelessness] is families hitting a crisis or misfortune through lack of adequate social programs and employment that make them fall into homelessness," she said.

While researching the film during the economic downturn Sky and Crowe found that laid-off workers and their families were facing some extreme stresses. The families they followed were relocating to follow work, doubling up in apartments with other families and even moving into family shelters. The producers said that some families are having to choose between paying their rent or feed their kids.

The Richards family in Brampton was one of the families featured in the film. Colleen Richards recently joined the fast-food workforce to support her family. She was working 60-hour weeks at \$10 an hour. Her husband was

laid off from Chrysler and his employment insurance ran out. She and her husband and two kids were finding it very hard to live off of her wage and at the time of filming they were facing an eviction notice.

After *Home Safe Toronto's* premiere Richards explained what she got out of participating in the film: "We had a



voice," she said. "It empowered us and it gave us an opportunity to open up dialogue and hopefully inspire some change...And to tear down some of those walls and the prejudice that is out there," said Richards.

Home Safe Toronto is a touching film that includes the stories of loving families who are enduring tough times. The film highlights the social need for better affordable housing policies that would enable families to have a decent standard of living even during economic downturns. The film reveals a liberal, human rights oriented, pro-union stance through its sourcing and its request for economic justice.

Sky's narrative voice is interwoven throughout the film. She tells the story of her grandmother who helped organize labour unions in the Toronto garment factory where she worked during The Depression era. The concluding segment of the film depicts community building today amongst laid-off workers and it was particularly moving. "Together we've begun to ask the bigger questions... [about housing] and about recognizing housing as a human right," said Sky in her closing narration.

As the finale music came on in the theatre during the film premiere, the audience clapped stridently. Their sound was resoundingly clear. The audience clapped even louder as the families who had participated in the film went on stage for the final Q&A period.

Audience members and friends of SkyWorks commented on the families' bravery for having faced the stigma of coming out and talking about their economic hardship. In the Q&A period the stereotype about homelessness was discussed and people talked about making changes to legislation so that there would be more affordable housing in future.

Home Safe Toronto will tour across the country at community screenings. The documentary is available for use by educational institutions, community groups and activists and is part of a tool kit of materials to help plan local strategies. For more information visit www.skyworksfoundation.org and www.vtape.org.



HIP HOP MATURES

By Mohammad Ali Aumeer

HIP HOP CULTURE has matured from its early roots.

Over the past four decades, it has been cultivated and seasoned beyond more than a way of life that represents the streets that sewed its roots.

The renowned MC, Common Sense, went from rapping about conscious and Afrocentric rap in the 1994 underground classic "I Use to Love H.E.R." to winning a Grammy Award with Erykah Badu on "Love of my Life" in 2003.

In between the time, he even shortened his moniker to simply "Common."

The maturation process has taken the art on a journey from the urban street corners and back alleys to every stage and almost every crevasse of planet Earth. But the fact that the culture still remains true to its roots is why it is still important and influential today.

The commercially successful aforementioned Common collaboration with Erykah Badu, is actually a song paying homage to the 1994 record.

Hip Hop heads are showcasing their art on global stages, sharing their history on podiums across higher learning institutions and even presenting their work at art galleries in Yorkville.

The latter of the three is the case for Justin Bua.

Bua, born in 1968, grew up in New York City at a time where the first seeds of Hip Hop culture were being sown.

He honed his artistic skills in the classroom as well as on the streets as a graffiti artist (a.k.a. a bomber). He then moved to California to attend the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

Since then, his commercial work has included MTV's "Lyricist Lounge Show" and EA Sports video games "NBA Street" and "NFL Street."

But it is perhaps his original drawings that has brought him the most acclaim.

His original works, which serve as a snapshot of underground urban culture has been praised by everyone from Ali Shaheed Muhammad of "A Tribe Called Quest" to actress Eva Longoria.

Longoria describes his work as one that "stems from his ability to make us relate to what is universal— regardless of our ethnicity or cultural upbringing. His work is about ONENESS, guiding us to transcend boundaries and celebrate what moves everyone— passion, emotion, and love."

Berry Gordy, Founder of Motown Records, describes Bua's work as simply "Unique! Exciting! Current!"

Bua truly is a representation of Hip Hop's maturation process.

He has gone from serving cans of spray paint to sub-way cars in the New York City to a celebrated artist who now teaches figure drawing at the University of Southern California.

Bua will be having a gallery show in Toronto on Saturday November 21 at the Liss Gallery (140 Yorkville Ave. Toronto, ON) from 8:00PM - Midnight.

For those who for every since they could remember "Use to Love H.E.R." or for those who more recently have begun to declare hip hop as the "Love of my Life," this event is not to be missed.