FILM REVIEW

Tamara Mariam Dawit, director. *Finding Sally* (documentary). 2020. 78 min. Amharic, Tigrinya, and English with English subtitles. Ethiopia. Catbird Productions. No price reported.

In the documentary *Finding Sally*, director Tamara Mariam Dawit narrates the story of her aunt Selamawit ("Sally") Dawit. In her 20s, Sally joined the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), which fought first against the monarchical government of Emperor Haile Selassie, and later against the military junta (called "Derg") which seized power after the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. When the Derg brutally cracked down on the EPRP through the torture and executions of the "Red Terror," Sally had to go underground and cut all contacts with her family. Sally's parents and five siblings had no news about her for nearly ten years, until they eventually learned that Sally had died of illness in 1977, near the EPRP stronghold of Assimba in Tigray.

In this documentary, the family remembers Sally's activism with pained ambivalence. As children of one of Haile Selassie's most trusted foreign diplomats, the six siblings grew up in a privileged household, attended international schools, and met prominent politicians from around the world. Some of Sally's sisters see Sally's militancy with the EPRP as a logical continuation of the family's involvement in politics, but others single-handedly attribute Sally's political radicalization to the influence of her then-husband Tselote Hizkias, one of the EPRP leaders. Brutawit does not even recognize her sister in the EPRP fighter who fled Addis Ababa for the rugged, harsh mountains of Assimba: "That is not Sally. […] I do not want to think of her living out there, alone." Sally's old EPRP comrade Fekerte paints a different picture of Sally as a strong-willed activist, committed to women's liberation, and surrounded by a loving community of comrades and friends. Life was very hard in Assimba, "but we always thought that the cause is bigger than anything." When Sally died of a sudden illness, "everybody was devastated. […] Everybody knew Sally, so when she died, everybody came from everywhere, and everybody cried." The documentary does not attempt a resolution between these different perspectives, but rather allows the viewers to "find" many (sometimes contradictory) "Sallys."

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This is a documentary where different intellectual projects seem to coexist and sometimes clash; the desire to tell the story of the family, for example, sometimes trumps the stated focus on Sally. It might be amusing to learn of Pierre Trudeau's one-time flirty behavior toward Sally's mother, but maybe not at the cost of cutting crucial information on Sally's political journey. Only while watching the extras on the documentary website, for example, do we learn that Sally had joined the women's committee of the Derg while covertly remaining an EPRP member, and that she had to go into hiding after deciding to give an impassioned public speech that was critical of the military government, well knowing it would endanger her and her family.

In a documentary that seeks to explore "collective silence" as the reaction to personal and collective pain, the narration is undecided about what to tell and what to omit, about what counts as "secret" or "mystery," and for whom. The film's promotional materials repeat the words "mystery" and "mysterious," but the storytelling never clarifies what exactly is the mystery that needs to be uncovered. Is the "mystery" the fact that the director only learned of Sally's existence when she herself was in her 30s? Or is it Sally's life that is "mysterious," as claimed by the documentary website? And, in that case, is the "mystery" Sally's act of class betrayal, as an upper-class Ethiopian who died in an isolated mountain village offering medical assistance to a poor community? "Collective silence" is also confusingly equated with "collective forgetting": about the Derg violence, we are told that "for most Ethiopians it is safer to forget than to remember"—a sweeping statement that opens more questions than it gives answers, and would require a much more careful and nuanced investigation.

The concluding minutes present Abiy Ahmed's 2018 rise to power as the long sought-after moment of national reconciliation, an interpretation that, dubious already at the time of filming, is completely untenable today in the face of the Ethiopian government's ruthless war on Tigray. As also noted by Safia Aidid in a perceptive review of the documentary ("In search of Ethiopia's past and present," *Africa is a Country*, 13 April 2021), Dawit's misguided celebration of Abiy Ahmed produces a distorted narrative of Ethiopia's recent history, including Sally's activism. Dawit shares the hope that Abiy Ahmed will finally implement the "unity" to which Sally also aspired. Against these proponents of "unity," we are told, stood the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) governments from 1991 to 2018, which "ignited a dangerous ethnic divide among the people." In fact, the opposite ideological genealogy is closer to the truth. The EPRDF leaders who restructured the Ethiopian state along ethno-federal lines after 1991 are the direct inheritors of the EPRP's vision. Against the authoritarian and assimilationist implications of imperial "unity," Sally's EPRP comrades understood Ethiopia as a country made of many different "nations, nationalities and people." Abiy Ahmed's apology speech for the victims of the Derg is implicitly presented as one of the first public attempts at confronting past violence, but many scenes portray Dawit walking around the Red Terror Martyrs' Memorial Museum, inaugurated in 2010 under the same EPRDF prime minister

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who oversaw Ethiopia's ethno-federalist reforms. Sally's photo is shown on the wall of the museum, next to other victims.

Dawit tells her audience that "Sally is the gateway into understanding the complicated history of Ethiopia, my family's story, as well as the contemporary landscape," but although the documentary struggles to meet all these concurrent objectives, it is sincere in mourning Sally's loss and sensitive in confronting the pain of the Dawit family—and indirectly of many others as well.

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