

Hana, dul, sed ...

하나, 둘, 셋 ...

VARIETY

Posted: Wed., Aug. 12, 2009, 4:32pm PT

Hana, dul, sed ...

(Documentary -- Austria) A Ri Filme production. (International sales: Austrian Film Commission, Vienna.) Produced, directed by Brigitte Weich. Co-director, Karin Macher.

With: Ra Mi-ae, Jin Pyol-hi, Ri Jeong-hi, Ri Hyang-ok, Ri Song-gun, Ri Song-chol.
(Korean dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

Refreshingly free of the usual media cliches about North Korea, "Hana, dul, sed ... " offers a left-field portrait of life in Pyongyang via the stories of four members of the national women's soccer team, pre- and post-retirement. First pic by Austrian helmer Brigitte Weich, not a trained filmmaker, concentrates on people, not politics, showing the women at work and at play, and putting a human face on a country too often painted in simplistic strokes. Good-looking HD production should kick its way into fests, cable and DVD, if only as a curio item.

Weich, who studied law and cultural management in Vienna, became fascinated by North Korea while attending the 2002 Pyongyang Film Festival. By the following year she was back, with the cooperation of state agency Korfilm, making her pic, partly inspired by Daniel Gordon's 2002 docu, "The Game of Their Lives," about the North Korean soccer team in the 1966 World Cup.

Pic ended up spending six years in production, with Weich also following the players abroad (to Thailand). During this time, the women were "retired" following North Korea's defeat first by the U.S. and then, in a 2004 Olympic qualifier, by Japan. The second half of the film became, perforce, a portrait of the women as they took on new jobs or got married and had a family.

Until 2000, soccer was the only sport in North Korea that was not open to women, and a couple of them talk about how their parents were initially strongly opposed to their daughters taking up the profession. Once on the national team, however, they got major privileges (family apartments, plus food allowances that insulated them from shortages).

North Korea's up-and-down fortunes during the past decade in women's soccer -- especially its rivalries with China and Japan -- is charted in docu footage and an interview with the national trainer. But it's the women themselves who emerge as the stars of the film, especially lively tomboy Ra Mi-ae and "team beauty" Ri Hyang-ok, now a coach and international referee. The final scenes are especially poignant, as the two talk about the close friendship they forged during their years of training together and how they see little of each other nowadays. Ri's almost tearful attempt to explain the magic of the sport is very moving: "What is beautiful about soccer is ... when you enter the pitch, you feel your heart swell and the whole world is yours."

Pyongyang life -- from its showcase monuments to its everyday locations -- is caught in an offhand way as the camera follows the women. At the post-screening Q&A, Reich said she wasn't interested in making another "secret" docu; she lets the exhortational billboards and general reverence shown toward president Kim Jong-il and founder Kim Il-sung speak for themselves, with no v.o.

Judith Benedikt's well-composed lensing is tops, and looks sharp and full-colored on the bigscreen. Traditional songs and karaoke ballads are used instead of a composed score. The title, untranslated, is Korean for "One, two, three ... ," heard in some of the training scenes.

Camera (color, HD), Judith Benedikt; editor, Michaela Muellner; sound, Cordula Thym, Eckart Goebel. Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (Ici & Ailleurs), Aug. 9, 2009. Running time: 102 MIN.