



Real or re-enacted? A still from *Burma VJ*. It's hard to tell which scenes are authentic

suspecting he's a spy. With its haunting score and slick editing, *Burma VJ* not only captures the fear, paranoia and exhilaration of the undercover reporter, but also gives a bruising idea of how precarious life is for millions of Burmese.

But there's a *but*. *Burma VJ* is pitched as a documentary, when it is actually a docudrama relying heavily on dramatic re-enactments. It begins with a disclaimer: "This film is [composed largely of] material shot by undercover reporters in Burma. Some elements of the film have been reconstructed in close co-operation with the actual persons involved." Mixing documentary footage with dramatic reconstructions is said to be a hallmark of Østergaard's films. With *Burma VJ*, that hallmark is a handicap, undermining the film's credibility and dishonoring the very profession its subjects risk their lives to pursue.

No scene is labeled as a reconstruction. Some are convincingly real, yet others are so simply betrayed as re-enactments by their wooden dialogue that soon I began to anxiously question the authenticity of every scene. I felt moved by a sequence showing protesters gathering on a Rangoon backstreet in defiance of the junta. But when I learned that it had been shot from scratch in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, I felt something else: manipulated.

The filmmakers will argue that the real issue here is the terrible plight of the Burmese people. In one sense, they are

Burma VJ captures the fear and exhilaration of the undercover reporter, and gives an idea of how precarious life is for millions of Burmese

right. In a clever sequence, we are watching the annual military parade when the frame freezes and then quickly rewinds through recent Burmese history. First, it is comic—the regime's troops, marching backward—then tragic. We glimpse survivors of Cyclone Nargis, dazed and clad in rags; refugees fleeing the smoldering remains of houses laid waste by Burmese troops; blood-drenched protesters on the streets back in 1988, when the last democracy uprising was snuffed out and thousands were killed. Twenty years of suffering is compressed into a few searing seconds. But it is still hard to simply recategorize *Burma VJ* as a well-made docudrama and leave it at that—not as long as its makers insist that it is a documentary, or that it is composed largely of the work of undercover reporters, when at least half of it seems re-enacted. The cause of Burma's democrats is ill-served by hyperbole and the reconstruction of events to fit a version of the truth.

Burma VJ won the top award at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam in November and was screened at last month's Sundance Festival. It closes with a raid by secret police on DVB's Rangoon secret headquarters—also a reconstruction, although the events it depicts are real and tragic enough. Three reporters were arrested, others went into hiding. Joshua is now in exile, but the authorities know his name—they tortured it out of a friend—and keep his family under surveillance.

Yet I imagine Joshua was comforted by the reaction of Rangoon's police chief. "DVB are the worst," growls Major General Khin Yi in the closing scenes of *Burma VJ*. "DVB are the ones who broadcast most of the false news about us." My brave Burmese colleagues couldn't ask for a bigger compliment, or for a better reason to continue their extraordinary work. ■

BOOKS

Exile's Letter.

Ha Jin's new book explores literature and deracination

BY DEENA GUZDER

HA JIN WAS A SOLDIER IN THE People's Liberation Army during China's Cultural Revolution, before moving to the U.S. on a scholarship and, eventually, winning the National Book Award for his novel of a lovelorn Chinese army officer, *Waiting*. In his nonfiction debut, *The Writer as Migrant*, Ha Jin explores attempts by transplanted writers—among them Conrad, Nabokov and Beckett—to find connections between their adopted homes and native lands.

Some see themselves as ardent champions of their tribe (Ha Jin confides that he once viewed himself as "a Chinese writer who would write in English

on behalf of the downtrodden Chinese"). Others are renegades or peripatetic cultural ambassadors or secluded misfits. Often,



they are each of those things at different times. Those who wish to reach audiences in their new homes must also grapple with linguistic loyalty. Much of the book is about this—it would be, given that Ha Jin has chosen to write exclusively in English and takes issue with those who argue the ultimate betrayal is to choose to write in another language.

By acquiring a fresh command of the nuances and idiosyncrasies of an adopted language, migrant writers can help create, in Ha Jin's view, a common lexicon in which their "real passport" is their art. "I share Salman Rushdie's conviction that something can be gained in translation," says Ha Jin. So do a growing number of readers in an increasingly borderless world. ■