

The Devil's Miner

(Docu -- U.S. - Germany)

An Urban Landscapes Prods./La Mita Loca Film Prod. co-production in association with Provobis Film/Latino Public Broadcasting. (International sales: Urban Landscape, Los Angeles.) Produced by Richard Ladkani, Kief Davidson, Werner Vennewald.

Directed, written by Kief Davidson, Richard Ladkani.

By **DEBORAH YOUNG**

A study in courage and harrowing portrait of a 14-year-old boy who works in a Bolivian silver mine, "The Devil's Miner" is an unforgettable journey through hell under the earth, where Satan is worshipped as king. Straight-as-an-arrow filmmaking raises this docu above the crowd. A hidden reality is brought to light by filmmakers Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani with simple, sharp strokes and minimal editorializing. Fest prizes should help it find the exposure it deserves on television and in limited theatrical venues. One can only hope it will spur human rights and international aid groups to action.



Basilio Vargas was a fatherless 12-year-old when he started working in the mines in what the Indios call "the mountains that eat men" in Cerro Rico, Bolivia. Eight million are said to have lost their lives since the Spanish conquistadors began exploiting the rich silver veins in Potosi, Bolivia. Today, alongside dark-faced men dying from silicosis from the dust they breathe (life expectancy is 35-40, and they know it), some 800 children labor in the mines.

Wisely, filmmakers focus not on statistics but on one smart, serious boy, Basilio Vargas. Basilio's younger siblings call him Papa because he is the family's breadwinner. His classmates at school insult him for working in the mines, but he toughs it out because he knows this is the only way to eventually get out.

The mines are literally an inferno: a world of fear at 95 degrees Fahrenheit, dynamite explosions, wagons without brakes, 24-hour shifts. Basilio gnaws on coke leaves to kill his hunger and makes \$2.50 to \$4 a day. The film's key image, however, is the devil himself, whom the miners worship as "the Tio." Frightening, red-eyed devil idols the size of a man are a feature in each mine. The little boys learn to worship him, because they instinctively feel God stops at the mine's entrance. Only the devil, propitiated with coke leaves, can save them from death.

The film leaves a lot to think about, along with a feeling of outrage at the fate of these children. Ladkani's camera captures both the claustrophobic mine shafts and exceptionally beautiful images of mountains and sky, making *docu* a memorable visual experience.

Camera (color), Ladkani; editor, Davidson; music, Jan. 29, 2005. Running time: 85 MIN.