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TOTAL DENIAL

Film by Milena Kaneva

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Repression and Oppression Collide

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Little is clear-cut when it comes to the political inner workings of a long-oppressed country. In “Total Denial,” Milena Kaneva’s incisive look at Myanmar, one thing is unmistakable: Its central figure, Ka Hsaw Wa, is the stuff heroes are made of (even if the film only narrowly escapes overglorifying him). An articulate student activist turned refugee with movie star good looks, he tries to make a difference by documenting the human-rights violations inflicted on Karen villagers by the military of Myanmar, formerly Burma.

And he was on to something. Along with his future wife, Katie Redford, an American activist who traveled to Myanmar to support a similar cause, Ka Hsaw Wa guided a victorious eight-year lawsuit against Unocal, an oil company that is now defunct. In the case, settled in 2004, 15 unidentified villagers sued the company for human-rights abuses, accusing it of collaborating with the Myanmar military to build a pipeline using forced labor. (Courtroom scenes in which the defense argues that the case is based on pure fabrication are nicely offset by the plaintiffs relating their harrowing, decidedly believable version of events from home.)

As repression in Myanmar escalates, so do the number of protesters, surely in some part inspired by Ka Hsaw Wa’s courage. Documentaries like “Total Denial” are less interested in exhibiting a particular filmmaking style than in telling stories that cry out to be heard.

TOTAL DENIAL Opens today in Manhattan.

Written (in English and Burmese, with English subtitles), produced and directed by Milena Kaneva; director of photography, Ms. Kaneva; edited by Ms. Kaneva and Nina Altuparmakova; music by Nikolai Ivanov; released by MK Production. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 92 minutes.

This film is not rated.