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WARRIOR OF LIGHT

A film by **MONIKA TREUT**

Winner

Audience Award

Thessaloniki Documentary Festival

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WARRIOR OF LIGHT

Filmmakers

Written, directed &
produced by MONIKA TREUT
Camera ELFI MIKESCH
Editor ANDREW BIRD
Original Music JACK MOTTA
Sound ANDREAS PIETSCH
Assistant Director LUCIANA MARTHA
PA SABINE LINZ, MANFRED GEIER
Sound Mix RICHARD BOROWSKI
Production Manager MADELEINE DEWALD

Featuring

Yvonne Bezerra de Mello
Alvaro Bezerra de Mello
Isabel Loefgren
Lucia Cavalcanti (Yvonne's mother)
Luciana Martha (Yvonne's assistant)
Ayrton S. Ribeiro
Dr. Evelyn Eisenstein
Paolo Longo
Campos (Capoiera teacher)
Amarylis Vianna (friend of Yvonne)
Fernanda Gorette

& the children of Projeto Uere (Children of Light),
featuring Tiago, Vanessa, Jessica, Joice, Pamela

Produced by Hyena Films Hamburg
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and Wibo de Groot

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Germany, 2001	90 minutes, Color
In English, Brazilian, Portuguese with English subtitles	1:1.37, Dolby SR

SYNOPSIS

Shot on location in Brazil, *Warrior of Light*, is a documentary portrait of the extraordinary Brazilian social activist Yvonne Bezerra de Mello, a fiercely individual female pioneer whose work with street kids in Rio de Janeiro's most dangerous slums is truly inspiring.

Bezerra de Mello, with her mile-wide smile and fierce pragmatism, is as much a contradiction as Rio itself. Born into the middle class, she studied at the Sorbonne, married a Swedish diplomat, raised three children in Europe, divorced, returned to Rio, and married a wealthy hotelier from a traditional Brazilian family. While growing into the customary social life of the elite, Yvonne established herself as an accomplished sculptor and writer who also took pleasure in her practice as a skilled equestrian.

All changed however, with the 1993 Candelaria massacre of homeless children by Rio's military police. Already concerned with the plight of Rio's street kids, Yvonne became a world-famous human-rights crusader by offering protection to survivors of the atrocity. Subsequently, she founded "Projeto Uere" or "Children of Light", which she dedicated to the protection and education of the kids living in Rio's streets. Although "Projeto Uere" brought her into conflict with Brazil's wealthy elite, Bezerra de Mello gained international recognition for her work, winning many awards including "Femme Lumiere" of the 20th century by the UNESCO.

What is most remarkable about Bezerra de Mello is her literally hands-on approach. Risking great danger in slums terrorized by drug lords, she builds shelters, establishes safe houses, and, above all, provides education, music, and boundless affection to children who have previously known nothing but poverty, abuse, and fear. Acclaimed German director Monika Treut (*My Father is Coming*, *Virgin Machine*) sees Bezerra de Mello not as a saint but as a fiercely individual female pioneer, a woman who is as vividly real as she is inspirational.

ABOUT MONIKA TREUT

Monika Treut was born in Mönchengladbach, Germany, on April 6, 1954. She studied literature and politics at Philipps-University, Marburg. In the mid-seventies she began working with video. Her PhD thesis *The Cruel Woman: Female Images in the Writing of Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch* was published in Germany, Switzerland and Austria in 1984.

In the mid-eighties Treut started to write, direct and produce award-winning independent features and documentaries, which screened at numerous film festivals throughout the world and enjoy international distribution. Retrospectives have been held in Mexico City, Sao Paolo, Taipeh, Toronto, Cambridge, Helsinki, Thessaloniki, Los Angeles and Lisbon. Treut's first feature, co-directed with Elfi Mikesch, was the controversial *Seduction: The Cruel Woman*, 1985, which since has become a cult classic. The black and white coming-out tale *Virgin Machine* followed in 1988. *My Father Is Coming*, a comedy of manners set in New York, was released in 1991. In 1992, Treut began directing documentaries including *Female Misbehavior*, four portraits of "bad girls", among them Camille Paglia; *Didn't Do It For Love* in 1997, a portrait of Norwegian-born Eva Norvind, B-movie star in Mexico, later dominatrix in New York; *Gendernauts* in 1999, about a group portrait of transgendered cyborgs in San Francisco; and, most recently, Treut completed *Warrior of Light*, on Yvonne Bezerra de Mello, an internationally renown artist and human rights activist who works with endangered children in the streets and slums of Rio de Janeiro.

Since 1990 Treut has also been teaching and lecturing at Colleges (Vassar, Hollins, and Dartmouth), Art Institutes (SFAI) and Universities (UIC, UCSD) in the U.S. Treut runs the independent film production company, Hyena Films, with offices in Hamburg, Germany.

ABOUT YVONNE BEZERRA DE MELLO

Yvonne Bezerra de Mello was born April 1, 1947 in Rio de Janeiro as Yvonne Cavalcanti, daughter of Italian Jewish immigrant parents, Lucia and Jorge Cavalcanti. After the divorce of her parents in 1961, Yvonne and her brother, Victor, were brought up by their mother, who earned the family's modest living as a secretary.

At the age of 17 Yvonne, a good student, won a student grant to study at the Sorbonne in Paris to study languages and art.

In 1969 she met a Swedish diplomat and married him. She lived with him from 1969 to 1980, first in Paris, Lisbon and then Stockholm. They had three children: Andrea, Gunnar and Isabel. After their divorce in 1980 Yvonne went back to Rio with her three children. Andrea was 10, Gunnar 8 and Isabel 5 years old. In the following years Yvonne again had to live on small wages earned by her work in a bank, in a bakery and as a baby-sitter. Although she worked hard and had little money for herself she started to work for an organization to help raped women. She also took responsibility for a daycare center for poor children. When she started earning a little more money she intensified her commitment for Rio's street-kids.

In 1989 she married Alvaro Bezerra de Mello, a hotelier. Alvaro is the youngest of eleven children from an upper class Brazilian family. He studied Economics at Harvard University in the US. Since she got married to Alvaro, Yvonne has intensified her work for Rio's street-kids even more. By the end of the 80's she started out helping the kids of Copacabana Beach. Since the mid 90's Yvonne has established several spots of refuge in many of Rio's favelas to give the children a place they can come to for help, to feel protected and get their daily meals. But not only the children's physical needs are looked after, their education is another emphasis of Yvonne's work. Scholarships support the children on their way to further learning a profession and how to earn a living on their own. Yvonne's headquarter at the moment is in the favela of Mare. Her network for the street-kids is growing from year to year.

Apart from her work in the favelas, Yvonne is also an artist: a successful sculptor, who enjoys national and international exhibition. She is also the author of four award-winning books. For her work as human rights activist she has won the following awards:

- First Brazilian Prize for human rights
- Yvonne is one of nine women who were honored as "FEMME LUMIERE" of the 20th century by the UNESCO
- She is one of 45 women who were honored by the UNICEF and AIDS Awareness Program.
- In 1997 she won the First Prize of the "INTERNATIONAL CITIZENSHIP" IN SAO PAULO
- In 200 she got an honorary doctorate from Loyola University, Chicago

EVAN'S KIDS

A Socialite in Brazil's Biggest City Finds That Taking in the Poorest Means taking On the Richest

By Stephen Buckley, Washington Post Foreign Service

June 11, 2001

Rio de Janeiro

The slum that hems in Yvonne Bezerra de Mello's community center here is a lawless place, literally run by drug dealers and thugs and the corrupt police who enable them. Yet there is one rule: no guns or drugs near Project Uerê, the bright and noisy place where some of this city's poorest, most brutalized children come to play and learn for a few hours a day. De Mello does not harass the drug dealers; they return the favor.

A few months ago, one dealer broke the rule. He pranced outside the center, shouting, "I'm the boss around here!" He waved an AR-15 rifle. Then the tall, lean young man tried to grab de Mello, who is 54 and a muscular 5 feet 6. She says she was unfazed. In fact, she was furious. She slapped him in the face. "Don't you know I'm old enough to be your mother!" she shouted. "You think I'm afraid of you? I'm not afraid of you!" The dealer retreated. "I take your point," he said. Then de Mello took him out for a beer.

"When you work in a place like this, you have to play the game by their rules," de Mello said, explaining why she didn't call the police. "If I play by my rules, the project would shut down." Depending on whom you speak to, Yvonne de Mello is either Brazil's most courageous social activist or its most reckless. She is either a relentless servant of the most despised citizens or a shortsighted self-promoter more interested in headlines than in substantive change.

Over the past 20 years, her work with poor children in Rio de Janeiro has won her acclaim at home and abroad. She has won Brazil's national human rights award. The United Nations named her one of the 20th century's Nine Most Enlightened Women. Her office wall is crowded with kudos from luminaries and governments worldwide -- former World Bank president James D. Wolfensohn, England's House of Commons, Hillary Rodham Clinton. Yet she remains one of the most polarizing figures in Brazil. Luciana Ramos Martha, coordinator of Project Uerê, says de Mello's burden may be a simple one: She is a complicated hero in a complicated age. "People have a hard time because they see too many contradictions in her," Martha said.

Much of the nation's elite feels betrayed by one of its own -- a woman educated at the Sorbonne, speaker of six languages, resident of one of the poshest neighborhoods in one of the world's glitziest cities, wife of a wealthy businessman. Many of her fellow children's-rights activists scorn as well-intentioned folly her 1 a.m. forays through Rio's underbelly to find and help street children.

"You protect the scourge of society, and for you there is no forgiveness," one prominent Brazilian businessman wrote her last year after a highly publicized bus hijacking by a

former street boy. Two paragraphs later: "You should have been the one killed, along with others like you . . . Stop and think about the harm you are doing to society." The Brazilian elite traditionally have scoffed at mixing with the middle class, much less with poor children. They see a woman in backless pumps and Rolex watch kissing an urchin's cheek, and they shout curses from their expensive cars. Both activists and the elite dismiss her as a caricature. The elite thinks of her as a guilt-ridden liberal with too much time on her hands. The activists think of her as a guilt-ridden socialite with too much time on her hands.

She is, in fact, impossible to figure out. She is neither left nor right. She embraces neither blind pacifism nor armed revolution. She blames Brazil's problems on both irresponsible government and apathetic citizens. She is at once the stubborn idealist and the sneering cynic.

'I've Buried a Lot of Kids'

One recent evening at her lush apartment, which faces a glittering bay and a soaring mountain, Yvonne de Mello pushed a tape into her videocassette recorder. It was a montage of her two decades of working with poor children: her giving a child a piggyback ride, cutting hair, checking a kid's tooth. Children shaped their fingers into guns, played makeshift drums, posed in front of the fountain at the infamous Our Lady of Candelaria Church in downtown Rio.

"He's dead. He's dead. That girl, she's dead," de Mello said. "I've buried a lot of kids in my life." Among them were eight youths killed by police at Candelaria in 1993. Seventy-two youngsters had gathered at the church that night, and when the shooting ended, de Mello was the first person they called. The murders made the plight of street children an international cause, and rocketed de Mello into the limelight. She protested for three years, an hour a day, five days a week, until the officers responsible were tried.

Assailants threatened to kill her three times in the year after Candelaria. On two of those occasions they put a gun to her head. They were never identified. The incidents still jolt her awake in the night. "Why didn't they kill me?" she asks. She would like to think destiny saved her partly for Project Uerê. The activist has her hands in a lot of things -- raising money to send poor children to private school, a jobs program for adolescents -- but the learning and community center is the soul of her work.

It's in the community of Maré, a cluster of slums housing about 100,000 people. Maré is a place where adults spend their days on stoops, buoyed by cigarettes, alcohol and neighborhood gossip. Walkie-talkie-carrying drug boys roam alleys and fill the few sunlit spaces. "I don't go down there," said businesswoman Amarilis Vianna, a good friend of de Mello. "My husband said we should support Yvonne, but let's do it from a distance." Every youngster at the center seems to have a story. Here is the 8-year-old whom drug dealers have hired to hide guns under his bed. There is the 6-year-old, one of six sisters, whose mother is a cocaine addict and whose father is perpetually drunk. Here is the 5-year-old who was raped when he was 3. De Mello spends a lot of time in the center's

first-aid room. Children often come in with suspicious scars on the belly, unexplained bumps on the head. She rarely calls the police.

"I'll start calling the police when this country's institutions work," de Mello said. "I reported a rape once, and it took seven years before I was called to testify." One day in May, de Mello treated a 6-year-old girl. For weeks the bright-eyed youngster had not been able to sleep. In a few minutes the activist would discover why. She knew that the girl had lice in her hair, and she and an assistant had spent two days trying to rid her of the pests. On this day, as de Mello cut the youngster's curly black hair, she discovered two holes the size of a pencil eraser in the girl's head. She had seen this before: Larvae of flies had nested within the holes. "Quick, get me some pork fat," de Mello said. "It'll draw out the larvae." She directed the girl to lie face down on a black vinyl bench. "We're going to make you better," she said. De Mello pressed a square of bacon fat over one hole. Five minutes later, a bloody, wormy white creature, maybe an eighth of an inch long, wriggled alien-like out of the girl's head. Over the next 45 minutes, 19 more squirmed out. When the girl's mother finally arrived, de Mello was livid.

"Is your house dirty?" she asked. "Yes," the mother said in a flat voice. "Then you need to clean it -- and clean it thoroughly," de Mello said. "Boil the sheets. Throw out the garbage. Clean every room. And you better do it, understand? Because I'm going to come and check. Your little girl could have died, understand? Now, let's get her to a hospital." The mother nodded. A few minutes later, de Mello said: "Did you see her face? It was like a curtain. Totally blank. She had no idea what I was talking about. If you know your house is dirty, why don't you clean it?"

De Mello cannot abide parents who neglect their children. Poverty does not excuse apathy, she says.

‘A Calling to the Street’

The activist herself grew up in difficult circumstances, raised by a woman whose husband abandoned her. De Mello's mother, a civil servant, toiled long hours to pay for private schools.

De Mello was writing poems about street children when she was 13. When she learned that a neighborhood prostitute was going to kill her newborn baby, she told the woman that her family would raise the boy. And it did.

She studied at the Sorbonne, and later won fame as a sculptor, but her heart was always in the street. She spent so much time with homeless youngsters that her own three children grew jealous. She would attend a dinner party or the movies, and upon leaving, she would tell her husband, "I have to go see the children," then she would sit on the sidewalk, dirtying an expensive dress as she gave them food and listened to their stories. Vania de Silva Morreira met de Mello on the streets of Rio's Copacabana Beach neighborhood 11 years ago. She had two girls, one a year old, the other an infant. De

Mello allowed the girls to sleep in her home. She brought them clothes and found them medicine. On their birthdays, de Mello brought pastries and drinks and the family would have a party on the sidewalk. Three years ago, de Mello bought Morreira a one-room house in a working-class Rio suburb. "My life changed 100 percent," said Morreira, a jovial woman who looks 20 years older than her 31 years. "I moved here with nothing, basically the clothes on my back. Now, the children" -- she has five now -- "all go to school."

Morreira's girls were among the lucky ones. Only 1 of 5 street children ever escapes homelessness. Many are doomed: Of the 60-plus youngsters who survived the Candelaria massacre, a Brazilian newspaper reported last December, 26 are now dead.

"It is very, very difficult work," de Mello said. "You have to be very, very patient. You see, they have to come to a place where they have a will again -- the will to take a bath, to put on clean clothes, to brush their teeth, to go to school."

'The Cruellest Face of Brazil'

One evening recently, de Mello was out around midnight, searching for street children in the dark isolation of a neighborhood called Madureira, on the edge of Rio. She found several sitting in a concrete area enclosed by iron bars. The boys squeezed through, shouting, "Auntie, Auntie." They grabbed for the blankets in her hand.

De Mello gravitated to a boy with sweet, light eyes. His name is Rodrigo, and he is one of her Candelaria boys. The activist has known the 14-year-old since he was 5. On this night, his polo shirt was at least two sizes too big and his sandals were mismatched. He sniffed glue from a Coke bottle.

De Mello stood inches from Rodrigo, making it impossible to hear their conversation. But her face appeared gray and drawn. "You can't do much when they get to this point," de Mello said a few minutes later. "It's very sad. At this point, they don't even remember their families, where they're from. For me, this is the cruelest face of Brazil."

To de Mello's critics, her ventures into the dark do not amount to much. "She goes out into the streets by herself, and it's all very heroic, and it's got a certain legitimacy, but in the end, what have you really changed?" said Mario Volpe, a UNICEF official and a longtime activist for children's rights. "It's great symbolism, but it doesn't do a lot of good."

Yes, de Mello is concerned about making a larger impact. That is why she works part time as a special adviser to the Ministry of Labor on issues affecting children. But no, she will not abandon the streets.

The victories are small and sparing, but they are enough to sustain her. She glows when she points out Bruno, the 18-year-old drug runner who has started taking classes at the center. She raves about 14-year-old Leonardo, whom she got enrolled in a prestigious private school two years ago.

Sometimes, though, she is elated just to get a child through the day alive. Which was the case recently as de Mello wove through Maré. At one home, de Mello stood at a window chatting with a mother when her old friend the drug dealer came around. He did not see her. He spoke in hurried, muffled tones to a colleague who carried a walkie-talkie. He was agitated. He waved a silver pistol. Several people passed him and ignored him. Beside de Mello stood a gaunt 4-year-old girl named Aparecida. Two other girls, about 10 and 12, also sat nearby. The dealer handed a grocery bag of cocaine to the youth with the walkie-talkie. He rubbed the pistol against his leg. De Mello appeared unruffled. She hugged the two older girls and joked with them. "How come I don't see you at the school?" she asked, referring to Project Uerê. The dealer walked closer, pistol at his side. He spotted de Mello. "How you doing, Auntie?" he said. "Fine," de Mello answered. "And you?" He did not respond. He had already vanished around a corner, his finger resting on the pistol's trigger.

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FESTIVALS

- Toronto International Film Festival
- Montreal (Cinema de Nouveau Films)
- Palm Springs International Film Festival
- Berlin International Film Festival
- Thessaloniki Documentary Festival
- Munich Documentary Film Festival
- Cambridge (UK) International Film Festival
- ILGA Lisbon
- Jerusalem International Film Festival
- "Women Make Waves" Taipei, Taiwan
- Amsterdam Documentary Film Festival
- Philadelphia World Film Festival