



FAMILY MATTERS: Sri Lankan migrant worker Josephine, shown here with her employers' child, is featured in the Indian-Greek documentary "When Mother Comes Home for Christmas."

ROTTERDAM

WHEN MOTHER COMES HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

(INDIAN-GREEK — DOCU)

A ZDF/Greek Film Centre/Filmsixteen production. (International sales: ZDF, Germany.) Produced by Vangelis Kalambakas, Nilita Vachani.

Directed, written, edited by Nilita Vachani. Camera (color, 16mm), Vangelis Kalambakas; music, Ross Daly; sound, K. Nandha Kumar. Costas Poulantzas. Reviewed at Rotterdam Film Festival (noncompeting), Jan. 29, 1996. Running time: 109 MIN.

(Sri Lankan and English dialogue)

An accomplished documentary with the narrative texture and emotional involvement of a dramatic feature, "When Mother Comes Home for Christmas" transforms a story of everyday hardship and sacrifice into a moving example of unsung heroism. Told with warmth, restraint and a genuine feel for the sometimes unfathomable bonds of family, this is ideal material for docu fests and quality foreign-language websworldwide.

The film focuses on Josephine, a migrant worker from Sri Lanka with a long-term job as a nanny-cum-housekeeper in Athens. Her story is placed in a larger context via information that 70% of Sri Lankan women who are gainfully employed are forced to leave their families behind and work overseas, mainly as housemaids.

The assembly-line aspect of this labor supply is conveyed in glimpses of English-language instruction, cooking and cleaning classes, training in table service and even safe-sex education, with the supposed joys of an overseas job expressed in a propaganda song produced by the Sri Lankan Government Board of Foreign Employment.

Parallel situations to that of Josephine and her family are touched on through interviews with children whose mothers work in far-flung places from Saudi Arabia to France.

Josephine's three children were raised in boarding schools. Their violent father abandoned them and died soon after, making overseas employment their mother's only means of keeping them off the streets. In the absence of her own kids, Josephine showers affection on Isadora, the infant child of her well-heeled employers. She sends most of her wages back home each month to support her family, who appear to resent what they perceive as her easy life in a wealthy foreign country, seeing her as little more than an anonymous source of bank transfers and gifts.

When Isadora's mother comes back from France for a spell over Christmas, Josephine returns to Sri Lanka for the first time in eight years. What should be a period of rest and renewed family unity becomes a stressful time of problems and demands, including the pressure to find an affordable house and provide financial assistance for her daughter who is about to be married. Ultimately, she becomes resigned to another long working stint in Greece.

U.S.-trained, Athens-based Indian filmmaker Nilita Vachani, who was assistant director to Mira Nair on "Salaam Bombay," lays out the

details of Josephine's life with patience and matter-of-fact objectivity. While the film could benefit from being slightly shortened, the material's emotional force grows steadily, constructing an engrossing portrait of an uncomplaining woman shouldering formidable burdens alone. —David Rooney