

DUST OF LIFE

(POUSIERRES DE VIE)

(FRENCH-ALGERIAN)

A Swift (Paris) production in association with 3B Prods., Hamster Prods., La Sept Films (France), IVP (Algeria), TeleMunchen (Germany), Paradise Film (Belgium) and Salon Films (Hong Kong). Produced by Jean Brehat. Executive producer, Charles Wang. Directed by Rachid Bouchareb. Screenplay, Bouchareb, Bernard Gesbert, from Duyen Ahn's novel "La Colline de Fanta." Camera (color), Youcef Sahr-aoui; editor, Helene Ducret; music, Safy Boutella. Reviewed at World Film Festival, Montreal (competing), Aug. 28, 1994. Running time: 87 MIN.

With: Daniel Guyant, Gilles Chitlaphone, Leon Outtrabady, Jehan Pages, Siu Lin Lam, Eric Nguyen, Yann Rousel, William Low.

Along with a wholly fresh view of post-Yankee Vietnam, "Dust of Life" is a coming-of-age tale that is both poetically universal and harrowingly personal. It should play well in fest and French-lingo situations, although pic's polyglot nature may prove a marketing puzzle for arthouses.

Pic begins with footage of the 1975 fall of Saigon scissored into the struggles of young Son (Daniel Guyant), whose mother frantically tries to reunite him with his father, a black American officer. She fails, and Son is picked up by the new regime in a sweep of beggars, orphans and — worst of all — Amerasians.

"Dust" settles into details of his adjustment to a tough work camp in a remote mountain region near Cambodia. Surrounded by guards, booby traps and hostile Montagnards, the boys know that escape only brings death, or at least a long stay in an underground tiger cage. Son finds a firm friend and protector in Bob (Gilles Chitlaphone), an older boy, and a sympathetic camp instructor (Eric Nguyen) allows him paper for poems and letters.

After the two friends fall in with smart little Shrimp (Leon Outtrabady), they make a break, and the subsequent raft trip downriver toward what was Saigon proves the pic's dramatic highlight. But even when things aren't moving, Youcef Sahr-aoui's imaginative widescreen lensing makes the most of lush landscapes and anxious young faces. Moody, propulsive music also helps, and helmer Rachid Bouchareb gets consistently honest work from his large cast of newcomers — with Algerian, Thai and Indochinese actors making a surprisingly convincing showing as mixed-race prisoners.

—Ken Eisner