Review of It's My Life, a film by Brian Tilley

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It's My Life is a portrait of Zackie Achmat, a South African activist and person with HIV. Zackie is the Chairperson of the activist group Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), speaking on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised South Africans with HIV/AIDS. Antiretroviral medications, which allow people with HIV to live practically normal lives, are not being made available through the public health care facilities in South Africa which effectively denies care and ultimately life to the majority of poor people suffering from high rates of infection. The current (2001) South African president, Thabo Mbeki, has even questioned the link between HIV and AIDS. TAC and Zackie Achmat battle this injustice in the courts and in the media, but Zackie takes his protest a step further. Despite his privileged economic position, (if necessary Zackie could get antiretrovirals) Zackie refuses to take these medications as a protest to the government's negligence.

It's My Life follows Zackie Achmat for five months during the course of his celebrated campaign against the South African government. In this particular episode of this struggle, Zackie is in the ironic position of petitioning the court to be an ally of the government in a suit being brought by the pharmaceutical companies. It's My Life attempts to straddle the line between news documentary and personal biographic portrait, the results of which are flaws in each mode of presentation. The political action and the delivery of coherent, in-depth information suffers from a lack of organization so that it is hard to follow the progress of TAC's goals. In addition, the filmmaker seemed to have access only to Zackie so that all of the information is filtered through what Zackie tells us or through what we can glean from sloppy videotaping of a television broadcast in his apartment. We see him talking in the phone or giving interviews, but rarely do we get an opportunity learn more about the issue and the struggle that make up the setting for the film's narrative flow. On the other hand, the fact that we are being presented a personal portrait softens the reportage requirement of the political component of the film. This video is an interesting introduction to a pointed political issue in South Africa and the World, and underscores the grass roots activism that continues to be necessary for proper advocacy of people with HIV/AIDS. Unfortunately, the personal portrait of this political person results in a stilted and contrived attempt to show the inner world of someone who seems more comfortable showing us a public face. (reviewed by Steve Brantley, Resident Librarian, University of Illinois at Chicago Richard J. Daley Library)