

Wonders of the African World

OCTOBER 25TH-27TH

AT 9 P.M. (ET): PBS

Shedding light on the
Dark Continent

I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO have your history stolen from you," Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. says midway through the landmark PBS docuseries *Wonders of the African World*. Gates is referring, of course, to his enslaved ancestors here in America. But the point resonates as well with his mission to uncover Africa's forgotten past and rich culture in this special. A noted Harvard scholar and expert on black culture, Gates has taken on the unenviable task of explaining Africa's grand ancient civilization to a world more likely to watch a music video than to read a historical text.

For that reason, Gates, as host and writer, tries his damndest to appeal to us in an informal way. As we journey, Indiana Jones-style, through the 5,000-year-old Nubian kingdom, the origins of Swahili culture in East Africa and Timbuktu, Africa's greatest

center of learning, our guide is at once unbelievable and uncharacteristically corny. Gates tries too hard to connect with his African "brothers" and his audience. The result is a six-part installment that meanders between relevant historical insights and unnecessary pandering. The so-called discoveries that Gates makes time and again are not discoveries at all but simply things that scholars (like his hero W.E.B.

DuBois) have previously researched. Given his scholarly work, Gates' perpetual surprise at his "findings" seems false.

Wonders, which is ambitious and beautifully shot, ultimately fails because it is neither impressive nor entertaining. And for us kids raised on the quick-cut video format, *Wonders* is like being forced to watch *National Geographic* while your friends are out playing.

—KEVIN POWELL

Henry Louis Gates at Blue Nile Falls in Ethiopia's Lake Tana

