



Healing balm in song and dance

FESTIVAL FILM

War/Dance (M)★★★★

Directed by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine

Review: Pier Leach

“It is difficult for people to believe our story,” begins the child’s voiceover narration of War/Dance. “But if we don’t tell you, you won’t know.”

We wouldn’t probably know much about the humanitarian crisis and the effects of the 20-year civil war in northern Uganda if it weren’t for documentaries like War/Dance. It isn’t the kind of story that tends to rate much of a mention in Western newspapers; more likely just the odd segment on late night foreign correspondent-type news shows.

But it is not so much that the story is unbelievable — it’s just one that many are loath to accept as true. Perhaps that is why the filmmakers, American husband-and-wife team Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine, have chosen to frame the gut-wrenching story of orphaned children born into the Ugandan civil war zone with a children’s singing and dancing competition.

Not to sugar-coat the genocide, rape, abduction and torture that these children have witnessed and in some cases experienced, as some critics have accused the film of doing, but to place the story in a context that really underscores that the film is about children. Not children from another far-off planet but ordinary children who might have suffered enormously, and like any children, still have dreams and aspirations.

The difference, I suppose, with the orphaned children featured in War/Dance,



Confronting: Orphans in Uganda.

is that they are competing with other groups of Ugandan schoolchildren not only for a trophy but for a sense of worth and to affirm the culture of their lost parents and ancestors that the war has all but obliterated — that “even though we are from the war zone we can do good things”.

The film focuses on the stories of three such children living in the Patongo refugee camp. Dominic, Rose and Nancy are children of the Acholi tribe who have each

suffered barely imaginable horrors at the hands of the Lord’s Resistance Army, whom they simply call “the rebels”.

They tell their stories quietly and directly to the camera between scenes from the camp’s preparations for the 2005 National Music Competition in Kampala, for which Patongo has qualified for the first time.

They are three of about 200,000 children without parents in northern Uganda. Nancy, 14, recounts quietly how her father was mutilated and her mother forced to bury the pieces. Rose, 13, saw both her parents murdered. Dominic, 14, was abducted by the LRA (notorious for turning children into soldiers and sex slaves) and forced to commit terrible crimes himself.

For each of them, the only real joy in life comes from the music and dance of their tribe. Nancy is part of the primary school dance troupe, Rose is a singer and Dominic, with his handmade xylophone, hopes to be the best player in Uganda.

Fine and Nix Fine, who won the best documentary director award at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, have found a rare tale of hope amid a bleak, brutal reality and have taken pains to present the remnants of a strong cultural heritage in a war-ravaged part of a poor country.

War/Dance puts a human face on a tragic human rights atrocity anaesthetised by its sheer remoteness for our everyday consciousness. It also speaks beautifully of the power of music and dance to heal even the most wounded souls.

War/Dance is at Joondalup Pines until Sunday and at the Somerville from April 7-13.