



Filmmaker Sean Fine bristles at the suggestion that his strikingly handsome new documentary, *War/Dance*, is too pretty to tell a gritty story. "I'm sick of hearing when something looks beautiful it can't be real," Fine offers, broaching the subject himself, "and tired of seeing documentaries that look bad."

War/Dance, which Fine shot and co-directed with his wife, Andrea Nix Fine, certainly looks great, even as it deals movingly with the lives of displaced kids in northern Uganda.

A low-grade war has been simmering there for 20 years, with children often being conscripted by a rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army.

This was news to the Fines, documentarians with significant international experience, who met while working at National Geographic and in 2003 married and formed their own film company.

The issue struck a chord with them in part because they had just had their first child. What they learned was that the Patongo refugee camp is populated by about 60,000 people who have been displaced by the conflict.

Like the more conspicuously activist Darfur Now, *War/Dance* finds an upbeat way of looking at a grim, seemingly intractable African dilemma, in this case by watching Patongo camp schoolkids prepare to compete in the

country's prestigious annual music and dance competition.

Not that regional Ugandan politics are the focus of the film, which screened early in the PIAF film season and returns in its final week, and which is mostly told through three children in the Patongo refugee camp.

The kids — Nancy, Rose and Dominic — often relate their stories directly to the camera, creating yet

another aesthetic hot-button issue for the film. "We wanted to push the envelope of documentaries," Fine says.

In doing so, the filmmakers received the 2007 documentary directing award at the Sundance Film Festival this year. They also received complaints from critics that the film's visual achievement distracted from its serious source material.

"It's a gift to be there," says Fine, who filmed in Uganda while Andrea contributed from home. (They put the film together in their basement studio.) "But we have a talent, and we damn well better put all our craft into it."

Some of the film's technique was a product of plain luck. Fine had planned on interviewing the kids the traditional way, conversationally, with the camera observing neutrally from the side.

But the kids were shy, and seemed to relax only when they could tell their detailed, often harrowing stories of terror and murder directly into the camera.

"The floodgates opened," Fine says. Because everyone in the Patongo camp had been through similar things, "no one asked them before. People don't ask you what happened, or how do you feel. And they just kept talking and talking."

He argued on the phone about it with his wife, who supported the approach even as he worried that it would look "contrived". "But Andrea said, 'When a kid is looking at you, you can't turn away'."

In the film, Dominic — whose skill on a rudimentary wooden xylophone is mesmerising — tells an especially wrenching tale of being conscripted by rebels as a child soldier and the atrocities he was forced to commit.

The emotional flashpoint comes when Nancy is taken to her father's grave with her mother, triggering a long meltdown from the so-far composed 14-year-old

That, the cinematographer says, was his genuine angel/devil moment. "I know when to put the camera down, and we know when not to push it," Fine says, but that day gave him pause.

His wife says that when he called home that night, "that was the most rattled I've ever heard Sean on a film. We talked a lot about it (whether to use the footage), but at the end of the day, they are such survivors. If you don't know they grieve this way, do you send a message that they get used to it?"

Despite the horror the kids don't

necessarily dream of fleeing or being adopted into the mythical idyllic West.

Fine says: "Some people ask us, 'Can I adopt those kids? I'm sure they want to leave'. And actually, they don't. I asked Dominic, 'Do you want to travel around the world?' He said, 'I want to visit, but I want to come back. This is my home. This is my land. I love this place.'"

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