

War Dance

USA | 2007 | 105 minutes

Credits

Director	Sean Fine, Andrea Nix
Screenplay	Sean Fine, Andrea Nix
Photography	Sean Fine
Music	Asche & Spencer/Chris Beaty/ Ryan Dodge/ Greg Herzenach/ Beth Husnik/Alan Omerovic/ Tom Scott/Thad Spencer/Janell Vircks/Richard Werbowenko/Al Wolovitch

In Brief

In the heart of Northern Uganda, where poverty is rife and the effects of the war have hit worst of all, a group of children seek escape from the horror through a national music competition. Oscar-nominated for Best Documentary Feature in 2008, War Dance has proven a heartwarming hit with audiences, garnering a collection of audience awards from festivals across the world.

The Makers of War/Dance

Africa has been the hot topic for many great dramatic films in recent years, dealing with Apartheid in South Africa or with historic problems of other regions in movies such as *Catch a Fire*, *The Last King of Scotland*, *Hotel Rwanda* or *The Constant Gardener*. By comparison, documentary films about the continent have been generally bland and uninspiring.

Before your eyes glaze over and you get ready to click away to read about the latest holiday blockbuster, Sean and Andrea Nix Fine's *War/Dance* isn't your typical documentary about Africa, and it's a very special film that uses gorgeous cinematography and narrative film techniques to show the dangerous war-torn region of Northern Uganda through the eyes and words of three kids who live in a refugee camp--Dominic, Nancy and Rose—all of them between the ages of 13 and 14, but whom have suffered hardships that no child should ever endure, including the loss of family members before their eyes. The film follows the journey of their Patongo Elementary School to the annual National Music Competition in Uganda's capitol city of Kampala, and it shows how music and dance helps them to escape their problems for a short time while showing off their tribal culture.

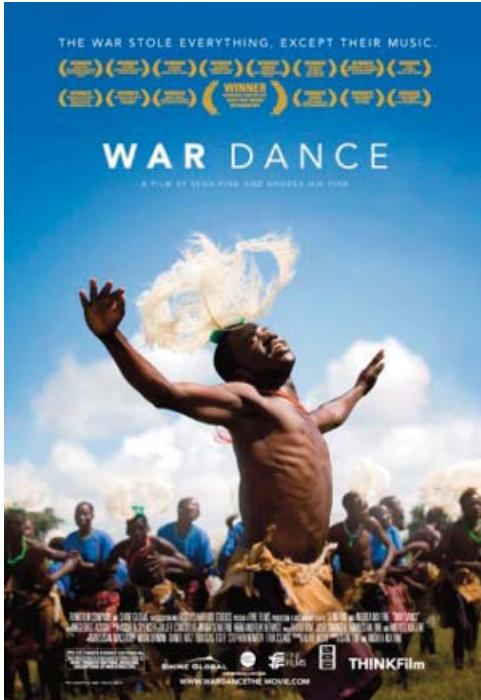
Having seen the movie back in January before this year's Sundance Film Festival where the doc was honored for its direction, the film really stuck with us and we were glad to finally get a chance to sit down with Sean and Andrea, a nice young couple who have been making films for National Geographic for many years and who have created what might be one of the most inspiring and heart-warming documentaries of the year.

ComingSoon.net: This movie originally came about when you went to Uganda for Shine Global to document what was happening there, is that correct?

Sean Fine: We were approached by a husband and wife team who started a company called Shine Global. They approached us and said, "Look, we started this non-profit. We want to end the abuse and exploitation of children through documentary film," and they contacted us and said, "We want to talk to you about our first possible film which will be in Northern Uganda," and we said, "Why Northern Uganda?" and they said, "It's the worst child soldier situation in the world right now," and we couldn't believe that we never heard about this. We are documentary filmmakers and we read a lot, and we start looking it up, and we were like, "This needs to be told. This is horrible what's going on there." At the time, over 30,000 kids had been abducted and forced to do awful atrocious things, the worst things you can imagine and we felt like we needed to do a film over there. So we partnered up with Shine Global, and we went over there for a scout. How are we going to tell this film? When Shine contacted us. When Al B. Hecht, the producer of the film, he contacted us and said, "Look, this film has to be good. There's a lot of Africa films out there. It had to get into Sundance. It has to have distribution 'cause it has to for our non-profit (organization) to make a difference." The trick was how was going to make an Africa film that's different? We've made a lot of Africa films, and I think we've made typical Africa films (for National Geographic), and I think we can say because we've made that, there are a lot of typical Africa films that sometimes portray kids in crisis in Africa the same way. We wanted to do something just stylistically different and break the mold a little bit. When we went over there, we knew that we wanted to tell the story of what was going on through the voices of three children. We wanted it to be their story. We didn't want too many adults or a lot of talking head experts on the war and what's going on. We wanted it to be a very personal, heart-rending kind of journey. When we started to leave, we heard about this music competition. We just heard a rumor of it. I got to Uganda and I started asking around and people said, "Yeah, we think it's happening." It was very hard to get the specifics, and once we heard it was happening, we started looking for schools in the North that might be competing in it. Some of the places we showed up to, the schools didn't even exist anymore. We were told that this school is competing, but it had been bombed out or shot up, and



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there was no school to perform. The last school we heard about was Patongo Elementary School, and I asked my translator, who was also a former child soldier, about it, and he said, "Right now, that is the most dangerous part in all of Northern Uganda. There's lots of rebels there. That is a place I don't think we should go, but if they go to the music competition, that would be amazing." Of course, that's the place we decided to go.

CS: Once you had a school that you were going to focus on, you must have had to spend a good amount of time there before you knew if you had a story for the film. Was it taking a bit of a risk by starting the movie not knowing if you had that story or not?

Andrea Nix Fine: Yeah, it's a risk to have any kind of story where you have any kind of ending that's almost analogous to a sports film of saying, "Well, they're going, they're competing, what happens if they don't do well?" But this is a very different story, because the music competition is important to the film in the sense that it allows you to see these kids as amazing, beautiful, resilient kids, not just children of war, not just what happened to them. We felt that following that storyline of who are these kids and their experiences, and who are they as whole people and what are their aspirations and goals, that just by leaving the camp and... as Nancy says, "I just want to see what peace looks like." At that point, they are so talented and amazing that they do go to the competition and just by going there and being able to take the stage and being able to show the rest of the world what it means to be Acholi when that word has meant nothing but pain and trauma to themselves and the rest of their world for the last 20 years, that is incredibly meaningful and transformative for them.

CS: I don't want to give away the ending, but would this have been a very different movie if the competition went a different way?

Sean: I think for us, the fact that they go compete in the competition, that is a victory in itself. We always had that in mind, just to see them go to a place where there is peace, to go to the south and experience that, experience other kids, experience the freedom to walk around and not be scared of rebels, that was a victory. That's more important than winning any competition, and also to represent their tribe in front of other kids, that's a victory. I mean, they're one of 20,000 schools that enter from the beginning, so they've gone through finals, semi-finals and now they're one of... I think at the competition was around 42 schools or so?

Andrea: Yeah, well there's about something under 5,000 kids at that competition, but if you think about how many schools started, about 20,000, times the number of kids in that school, it's exponential. This is the Super Bowl to these kids. What we found out is that any Ugandan celebrity, actor, musician of any kind of note has all performed in this competition. They loved telling us these stories. "I saw your film and loved it. I know what that was like."

Sean: It's huge. It's like our Final Four. We can't stress that enough. It's a huge competition, and for these kids to be there and to make that journey, I think for us, that was the whole part of the film we enjoyed making.

CS: How did you pick the three kids on whose stories you wanted to focus? You really had them open up and go through some tough stuff on camera.

Sean: We spent a lot of time without the camera talking to kids, just hanging out, watching them practice, and kids would kind of come up to us. Once they would see what we were about, they would come up and say, "I heard you're looking for kids that might have stories about the war. I want to talk to you." We had a tree—it's actually the tree that Dominic plays the xylophone under—where we'd take the kids and talk to them without the camera, and just get the overall story, not the specifics and not go into a lot of depth, just ask them questions about dancing and things. The most interesting one is Nancy, because Nancy was kind of this jokester. I would always be shooting, she'd come up and nudge me, nudge the person I was shooting. They'd be dancing and she'd make everybody laugh, so she'd always be joking and playing pranks, and finally I said, "Can I talk to you one day?" and she said, "Okay, tomorrow you can go meet me under the tree at a certain time." Well, we went and sat for two hours, and no Nancy. I came back the next day and said, "Where were you?" and she said, "Well, I was watching you" and I said, "Well, why didn't you come and talk to us?" and she said, "I wanted to see if you would come try and find me, but because you sat and waited for me, I will talk to you." She's testing us to see if we have patience so that's how we found her.

How we found Rose is... Rose is not the kind of person most filmmakers would gravitate towards. She's very shy. I kept filming and I kept seeing this little girl, off to the side, crying or just looking sad, and then when she would dance, she would light up, and no matter how much I tried to film other people, my lens would always land on her. I was just drawn to her, and the first time I said, "Can I talk to you?" and she didn't even answer. She just looked down. And I was like, "Wow, what's happening here? I'm just going to keep filming her I think." I actually said that this probably wasn't a good person to film, but I kept filming her because she was so photogenic and her transformation was so apparent. Then finally, she came up to me after a week and said, "I want to talk to you. I think I'm ready to talk to you." They just chose us, and then Dominic is just a filmmaker's dream. I mean, he's a great little character.

CS: Also in terms of getting them to open up, there's a scene where Nancy visits her father's grave and when Dominic confronts the rebel prisoner to find his brother, were those things that you had to help set up or were they things they wanted to do and you just

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happened to have the camera there to capture it?

Sean: Yeah, it was kind of like that. There were things that they wanted to do, and we brought the camera along. I mean, Nancy going to visit the gravesite, we knew that she was going to go visit her father's grave, but I wasn't really sure about that angle of it, because the translation was kind of getting lost. I thought what they were going to do was to go visit their old home and pray to their father, because right next to that gravesite in a scene we took out of the film is their old home and they're walking around and it's overgrown by bushes and they're laughing, and then all of a sudden, Nancy's Mom goes, "I need to show you something else" and that's where you pick up and you see the camera—I'm very close to them, and that instant she cries like that is the instant I heard her cry like that, and so we're right there following that. Dominic with talking to the former child soldier. I'm not going to lie that having the camera there probably helped get that access for him, but it's something he wanted to do, so I was very happy to go ahead and help with that if I could, by having the camera there. The focus on that scene is not so much that he's there talking to that guy, it's what he says. I just cannot believe when I got back and looked at the translations, that this little boy asked this former child soldier—after learning that something pretty bad had happened to his family—that he then asks him, "Why do you do this?" I mean, the courage of a little boy to ask a rebel soldier that, that's more amazing to me than anything, that he's there and he can ask that.

Andrea: That scene's also very poignant I think, especially because the next thing you find out is something about what happened to Dominic during the war that was especially traumatic, 'cause he was an abducted child soldier. One of the things that's very poignant is that he's talking to the rebel commander who's probably all of 18 years old. Had Dominic not escaped, he's kind of talking to himself. The reason that Dominic, when he was in the field, had to go through such pain and was forced to do things, was because he was given orders. When he asked the rebel commander, "Well, why do you do these things?", the first thing he says is "I was given orders." He's talking to himself in a way.

CS: What were the logistics of making this movie? First of all, you are in a very dangerous environment, but as far as getting film for the cameras or supplies, what was involved with making it, in that sense?

Andrea: You prepare for a shoot like this long, long, long before you go and the first thing we do is we research the danger of it, because we obviously knew it was a dangerous place. We're not idiots, and we don't go out there, especially since we're parents and we're married and we have a lot at stake right now that we had to approach this very differently. We had to split up for the very first time. Sean and I always go in the field together, but we decided we couldn't have both parents in the war zone, so we had to collaborate via cellphone. When Sean could get up there just about every other day, he'd have to stand up to a place of reception in the middle of the night and call me, so we could talk about the story.

Sean: I was in Uganda the whole time, but Andrea was back at home, so it was the first time we had not gone together in the field, so the only place we could make calls was on this brick wall next to a local brothel basically, and I could get one cellphone bar and I would call her and say, "We shot this and this and this" and I'm dealing with danger, with medical issues—I had malaria during the second shoot for three weeks—and just trying to keep everyone safe, and she's helping like see the big picture basically.

CS: Have you been in touch with any of the kids since making the movie or had a chance to screen the movie for them yet?

Sean: We hope to go back in December or January and screen the film for them. We're in constant communication with them. Our translator goes back and talks to them. We actually have a scholarship fund set up for them and have been helping them out with things. Also, Dominic has my cellphone—I left it there—so he calls at the 2 or 3 in the morning and we get this long number on our phone and he hangs up, because it's free for us to call him back, so I call him back and we talk. The last thing we heard was that they might possibly be performing for the Queen of England when she comes to visit Kampala in November, because of the competition.

CS: As you say, we've seen a lot of movies about Africa and it's hard to get people to see movies about the subject because let's face it, most Americans don't really care. What would you like people to get out of the movie?

Andrea: I think that's the first thing. I think we want people to leave the movie and to tell others, to say, "I just saw something and I've never seen anything like it. I haven't seen a documentary like that. I haven't seen a story about African kids in conflict like that. I haven't seen a story that's moved me like that in such a long time. Just by getting that word out, you're going to get more people to see the film, and the beauty of all that, is that a big portion of the proceeds of the film are going back to Shine Global which are using NGO's on the ground to help change that situation. That buzz, that word-of-mouth getting out there, is what we really want to have left, and hopefully invoke change and make their lives better.

Sean: I want people to leave that theatre thinking "Wow, you know kids in Africa aren't that different than my kids, aren't that different than me." I want them not to constantly see the news and see kids in Africa as victims, as just people that horrible things happen to. I want them to see them as just normal kids that are stuck in a bad situation, but given the chance can do amazing things, tremendous things, and that are just like us. We're human, we're very similar, there's just an ocean that divides us.

- Edward Douglas, ComingSoon.net

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