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A Fine Line: Oscar-nominated filmmakers Andrea Nix Fine and Sean Fine strike a balance between tragedy and beauty

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A Fine

Oscar-nominated filmmakers Andrea Nix Fine and



Line

Sean Fine strike a balance between tragedy and beauty

By Gerry Boyle '78

Photos by Abbie Trayler-Smith



Documentary filmmaker Sean Fine had to make tough calls as he shot the Oscar-nominated film *War/Dance* in a refugee camp in war-ravaged northern Uganda. Fine and his crew sped over the perilous road that led to the camp through rebel-controlled bush. They negotiated with officials to get permission to film at all, even to stay in the camp overnight. They carefully built relationships with former child soldiers who, if they chose to, could recount unspeakable atrocities.

But some of the most important calls Fine made were by tenuously connected satellite phone to suburban Washington, D.C., where his wife, partner, and co-director, Andrea Nix Fine '91, was at their home/office.

"I would climb up this brick wall next to this kind of brothel," Fine said. "You could get a bar of reception there."

Fine was on the ground in a remote area near the border with Sudan. Because the couple decided they could neither bring their nine-month-old son, Aidan, nor risk him losing both his parents, Nix Fine stayed home—and considered the film's bigger picture.

"My responsibility was more, 'What is the story we're telling?'" she said. "'How are we going to do it? Who are we going to talk to? What kinds of things do we want to ask them?' So we would talk about that every day, because the whole thing about films, I find, is that it's just an endless chain of decision making."

In the end, their decisions were the right ones.

War/Dance tells the story of children swept up in the brutal and



Above, Andrea Nix Fine '91 during filming of an Inuit polar bear hunt in the Arctic. Previous page, Dominic Akena, one of three students profiled in the film *War/Dance*, practices on his xylophone at Patongo refugee camp.

The first Fine Films documentary made for the big screen rather than television, *War/Dance* garnered top honors from Sundance to Sedona, Philadelphia to Flagstaff. In January the Fines received word that the film was one of five Academy Award nominees for best documentary feature. *War/Dance* didn't win, but its reputation spread far and wide.

For a young filmmaker, it's been a dream come true—managing the flurry of attention and chatting with actor-producer and Darfur activist George Clooney at a luncheon for Oscar nominees in Los An-

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ANDREA NIX FINE '91

still-simmering Ugandan civil war. It was shot in Patongo refugee camp, the teeming home to 60,000 people seeking refuge from the Lord's Resistance Army, a brutal rebel force. Orphans and former LRA child soldiers, most of whom have witnessed or even perpetrated horrific atrocities, are now in the camp schools. They enter a national music contest but must run a dangerous gantlet to reach the competition in Kampala, the capital.

To find out whether they win the contest you have to see the film (now available on DVD), which has been received enthusiastically everywhere it's been shown. The award-winning husband-and-wife collaboration, the first that had the filmmaking partners physically separated, produced a powerful film about a place and people that is both disturbing and inspiring.

geles a couple of weeks before the February awards ceremony. But the success of the film is also fulfilling to the person who first put a camera in Andrea Nix Fine's hands.

"My dream has been that, before I died, I'd see a kid from my class win an Oscar," said Professor of English Phyllis Mannocchi, who taught Andrea Nix in a documentary filmmaking class Nix's senior year.

War/Dance came close. And while Mannocchi could not have predicted which of her students would receive the Oscar nomination, she does recall Nix Fine as a very thoughtful student. "You looked at her and you knew she was taking it all in," Mannocchi said. "She was a philosophy major, and you could tell."

Andrea Nix arrived at Colby from upstate New York, where she



Pantongo Primary School students practice a traditional dance preparing for Uganda's national music and dance competition.

attended public school and played the flute, among other musical endeavors. “It was a good high school, but it didn’t have philosophy or political science or studio art or poetry,” she recalled. “[At Colby], I did all that. I did as much as I could.”

She advises aspiring filmmakers to do what she did, which was to dig into as many different academic areas as possible and to concentrate on improving her writing. “Be able to articulate your ideas and express yourself, because if you can’t do that, no one’s going to make your movie,” Nix Fine said.

It was senior year that she discovered that filmmaking “just made me spark.”

Her group in Mannocchi’s class made a VHS video on the effect of television on young children. They drove to Boston to interview an expert in the field and pieced together clips of kids’ TV. “Looking back on it, it was more the process than what we made,” she said. “I loved that you had to combine aspects of visual ideas mixed with writing, mixed with just getting something done.”

After graduation, Nix Fine turned the spark into a flame.

She moved back to upstate New York and got a job at the local public television station, for minimum wage, she said, “and just started hammering away.”

That job led to a position at National Geographic, where she worked for a decade, moving steadily up the ladder. As a producer, director, and writer, she has worked all over the world, often in remote locations, from Africa to Greenland.

“Andrea has done such cool stuff,” her husband said. “You’re talking about a person who went to the Arctic and they were starving.” In fact, Nix Fine accompanied Inuit hunters on a two-week excursion traveling by dogsled, and the group did run out of food, causing the hunters to mutiny against their leader.

“You get put into all these amazing situations,” she said, noting that she has avoided one of the occupational hazards of her profession: “I’ve been incredibly lucky. I have somehow avoided major parasite problems.”

“My dream has been that, before I died, I’d see a kid from my class win an Oscar.”

PHYLLIS MANNOCCI, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH

“You drive through the camp and it’s just awful conditions. ... And then you see these kids dancing under this tree. How could this exist in this place? As soon as I saw them and you could feel their energy, I said, ‘This is the place.’”

SEAN FINE



A government soldier watches as students practice. The students live in a refugee camp where they are protected from rebel forces in northern Uganda.

At National Geographic Nix Fine met her future husband, who graduated from Connecticut College in 1996. Sean Fine had the filmmaking gene, passed down from his parents, acclaimed documentary filmmakers Paul and Holly Fine.

Sean and Andrea Nix Fine founded Fine Films in 2003, working as co-directors. In 2005 they were contacted by Susan MacLaury and Albie Hecht (former head of Spike TV, the cable network), a husband-and-wife team who founded Shine Global, a foundation dedicated to producing films that combat the abuse and exploitation of children.

Hecht knew the Fines through *True Dads*, a television special Sean Fine directed. MacLaury and Hecht had traveled to Uganda and

Kenya with friends who run a relief organization there. By pure happenstance, the couple learned of the music competition in Uganda. “The truth was that every child in the war zone had a story to tell,” MacLaury said. “This [competition] gave us a vehicle.”

They asked whether Fine Films wanted to do the film. The answer was yes—but then the Fines looked into the situation in northern Uganda more closely. They learned that just traveling to the area was very dangerous. They considered their young son and made a decision. “Having two parents [in northern Uganda] with a child at home is just not responsible,” Nix Fine said. “So, for the first time, we decided to split up.”

Sean Fine took the three-person crew to Uganda in 2005. He scouted locations with a translator named Jimmy Otim. They looked at schools in Gulu, 80 miles to the west, but Fine wasn't inspired. "Jimmy said, 'There is one other place that might be going [to the music competition], but I don't think you want to go there. It's the most dangerous place. No nongovernmental organizations or aid groups really go out there.'"

The place was Patongo. That it was out of bounds was all Sean Fine needed to hear.

The approach to the Patongo camp is through rebel territory via a narrow dirt road walled by 12-foot-high elephant grass. Motorists, including the filmmakers, blast down the road at nearly 100 miles per hour, hoping to make it to the relative safety of the camp, which is defended by government soldiers.

"You're driving that fast to avoid an ambush, which would basically be the rebels jumping out of the grass and machine-gunning your car," Fine said. "When I talk about rebels, I'm talking about kids. The reason it's so dangerous is that, if you get ambushed or you run into the rebels, they're not asking for money. They're not trying to steal anything from you. They're just trying to create the most chaos they can, which involves killing you in a pretty graphic, gruesome way."

And the Lord's Resistance Army, headed by a messianic leader named Joseph Kony, has a knack for violence bordering on incomprehensible. One girl profiled in the film was forced to watch as her



*Sean Fine and Andrea Nix Fine '91 on the red carpet prior to the Academy Awards in February. Their film, *War/Dance*, was one of five nominated in the category documentary features.*

and it's just awful conditions all around you. And then you see these kids dancing under this tree. You kind of think to yourself, how could this exist in this place? As soon as I saw them and you could feel their energy, I said, 'This is the place.'"

The long-distance collaboration began.

The crew shot during the day and the Fines conferred at night. "We just took on different roles," Nix Fine said. "Sean had to really deal with the physical challenges of being in that camp—being sick, trying to figure out the food situation—and the bureaucracy."

"People think all the glory is being out there," her husband said, "and the filmmaking is being out there. But it's not. It's thinking about it. It's thinking about the story, the structure. Andrea was doing that on a daily basis."

Sean Fine coped with a serious case of malaria. He and the crew were stopped on the road late one night by soldiers who stuck grenade launchers through the window of the car. A half hour of frantic shouting determined the soldiers were from the government.

Back at home, Nix Fine worried. "All the time," she said.

She noted that arrangements had been made with a helicopter service on the border so the crew could be pulled out in an emergency.

After six weeks the crew left Patongo. Conferring with MacLaury, Hecht, and others, Andrea and Sean Fine hunkered down in their editing room in Chevy Chase. How would the film be structured? What got used and what was cut out? What was the best way to tell the children's stories?

"[As a filmmaker], my favorite thing is that, in a way, you go to school the rest of your life."

ANDREA NIX FINE '91

parents were killed, dismembered, and cooked in a pot. A young boy was forced to kill his mother in order to save his siblings. "All of them have somebody killed in their family or somebody abducted," Fine said. "It's [as normal as] having a brother or sister."

Yet the filmmakers found the Patongo camp to have, at its core, a resilient sense of joy.

"I still remember the day we drove up," Fine said. "You drive through this really dangerous territory and then you drive through the camp,

"You make your film three times," Nix Fine said. Once before shooting. Once on location. "And then, when you get back and start working with the editor, then you come up with what the movie is really going to be based on, what's really happened."

Hours of footage were cut to 65 minutes. The order was shuffled and reshuffled. Scenes fell off and then were pulled back in. Finally the team decided that the film needed more of the kids' day-to-day life.

In 2006 Fine and the crew returned to Patongo for another six



Patongo Primary School takes the stage to perform the Bwola dance at the National Music and Dance Competition in Kampala.

weeks of filming. They returned to Maryland, the editing work continued, and the film emerged to resounding acclaim—and occasional criticism.

Critics said that, with all the atrocity, “The people shouldn’t look beautiful,” Fine said. “They should look downtrodden and scarred. They can’t smile.

“But I wanted people to see that people from northern Uganda *are* beautiful. Their resilience. It’s unnerving to see how resilient these kids are. I can’t even think of the things that they went through and how they are in life. They aren’t just victims moping around.”

That is an important part of the mission of Shine Global, the film’s producer. “What is important to us is to find hope within the horror,” MacLaury said. “We don’t want to show these children as victims. We want to show them as children who are prevailing.”

In the future Sean and Andrea Nix Fine may work on another film relating to Shine Global’s mission, this one exploring the way oppressed children in various cultures survive through sports.

The Oscar nomination may lead to feature film deals, as production companies now approach the couple—rather than the other way around, Sean Fine said.

Nix Fine said Fine Films is looking forward to new directions, though future projects will be taken on with consideration for the team’s newest member. Roan, the Fines’ second child, was born in August 2007.

They’ll cope with the logistics, Nix Fine said, as they move into unknown film territory. “My favorite thing [as a filmmaker],” she said, “is that, in a way, you go to school the rest of your life.” ✨

FROM FILM TO SCHOLARSHIP FUND

The three children featured prominently in *War/Dance*—Dominic, Nancy, and Rose—represent thousands of other children in Ugandan refugee camps, said co-director Andrea Nix Fine ’91. “We wanted to make sure something could happen for them, too.”

Nix Fine said she and her husband, Sean Fine, have stayed in touch with children in the camp. Dominic has qualified for high school, she said, and Nancy wants to go to medical school.

“The kids are doing well, as best they can, as the war continues,” Nix Fine said.

“Sean left his cell phone there,” she said. “Dominic, the boy in the film who plays the xylophone—his brother sometimes travels outside the camp, and if he can get a charge ... he just does a quick call and hangs up. It’s always in the middle of the night, like three o’clock in the morning. You see a number come across your screen that’s like twenty digits long. Then we know it’s him.”

Meanwhile, a busload of children was abducted by rebels just two days after the film crew left Patongo.

The founders of Shine Global, which produced *War/Dance*, plan to donate all profits from the film to the Acholi children in northern Uganda. They also suggest that viewers can donate to a scholarship fund for the children in the Patongo refugee camp. The fund is administered by AMREF USA, a nongovernmental relief organization working in northern Uganda.

For more information on *War/Dance* and ways to help, see shineglobal.org, fine-films.com, or wardancethemovie.com.