

# Peak Screenings in Park City

*Never Forever* director of photography Matthew Clark (left) and gaffer Jason Valez plan their strategy in the tiny Chinatown apartment that served as a key location.



place,” says Clark. “The producers were concerned that we might not have the time and space we needed to do what we needed to do there, and they talked about building [an apartment set], but on a low-budget film there’s something about a built set that doesn’t really do it. We felt everything needed to be organic, even though it would take some sacrifices. Our goal was to step back and let the actors do their thing.”

During prep, Clark and gaffer Jason Valez spent time in the locations “just watching how the light happened, and figuring out how to bring it up just enough that we could shoot it,” says the cinematographer. “We shot the whole movie at a T2.8. My focus puller, George Hennah, was a godsend.”

In Jihah’s apartment, the crew positioned two 6Ks on a Condor outside the window, one keying through the window and the other bouncing around inside for fill. “Inside, we used a few Kino Flos [for day scenes] or China balls [for night],” adds Clark. On one occasion, the Condor was out of commission during filming of a day scene, one of Sophie and Jihah’s early sexual encounters. “On a 25-day schedule you can’t stop shooting, and it just so happened that the sun was out and hitting the windows at that moment,” recalls Clark. “I asked Gina if we could move Jihah’s bed a little closer to the window so we could keep going, and she said sure. Without the

6Ks there’s a little less sparkle, but that look really sets that scene.”

The large, two-story house Sophie shares with Andrew posed a different set of challenges. “It was huge and full of white walls, and we were constantly trying to cheat our way into seeing six rooms at a time,” says Clark. “We’d bring light in from outside, create sun skips on the ground, that sort of thing. A 4K at full spot hitting the floor just out of frame fills up a room in a way that feels very natural, like sun’s coming through the window, and a spot overhead just raking an area of the ceiling can create a natural sort of fall-off. When the time came to film Sophie playing the piano, we just happened to get a little sun streak in the room at the right time. There were a lot of happy accidents on this film!”

One of the pleasures of working with Kim, he adds, was that she was eager to make the most of them. “Gina had copious notes about what she wanted, but when we got to the locations she didn’t hold onto them too much — her notes and storyboards were a jumping-off point. Directors who don’t have a lot of experience are often very tied to those things, sometimes to the point where they’ll warp a scene to get that shot they’ve been thinking about for two years. Gina held onto her ideas but allowed the specifics to change. She was able to grow into the film

and let the rest of us grow into it, too.”

The Zeiss Superspeed lenses Clark used on the show were mandated by the budget — he would have preferred the newer and more expensive Cooke S4s — but he soon found ways to take advantage of their unique characteristics. “Superspeeds are slightly soft and flare a bit, and sometimes I was able to use that, especially in the scene where Sophie and Jihah really make love for the first time. We were on a long lens, and it was a very tight shot and as they finished she looked up at the sky out the window and I dropped down low and the light flared the lens. It just felt right.

“You can’t make every frame of a film beautiful or you get tired of it, I think,” he concludes. “What’s exciting is when that beauty comes from the story and the actors and the film feels beautiful as a whole, even though each frame might not be beautiful. On *Never Forever* I felt like everything was evolving in front of us, and we just plugged in where we would fit.”

— Rachael K. Bosley

## *War/Dance*

**Cinematographer:** Sean Fine

**Directors:** Sean and Andrea Nix Fine

*War/Dance* was one of the most ravishingly visual films in the documentary competition at Sundance this year, so much so that some festivalgoers wondered if it were possible for a film about war survivors to be *too* beautiful.

Scheduled for release this fall, *War/Dance* was shot on hi-def (HD) video with a 24p Panasonic VariCam. The cinematographer was Sean Fine, who also co-directed the picture with his wife and production partner, Andrea Nix Fine. The story concerns three children — Dominic, Nancy and Rose — who live in the Patongo displacement camp deep inside rebel territory in northern Uganda. All three children had family members

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Top: Young inhabitants of a Uganda refugee camp practice for a dance competition in a scene from *War/Dance*.

Bottom: Cinematographer/co-director Sean Fine and Dominic, a former child soldier who is one of the film's subjects.

slaughtered by the Lord's Resistance Army or were themselves abducted to fill the rebel ranks. The film follows their effort to leave the refugee camp for the first time in order to compete in Uganda's National Music Competition.

As its title suggests, *War/Dance* interweaves two threads. Making a conscious decision not to make an overtly political film, the Fines eschew outside experts and academics, and instead look at the 20-year-old civil war through the eyes of children who experienced it. Dominic, Nancy and Rose recount their experiences gazing straight at the camera, and these intimate interviews are intercut with stylized, slow-motion footage of the children standing at the scene of their respective traumas. "We wanted to have something that felt like you were inside their head, but also witnessing it with them as they witnessed it again," explains Nix Fine.

The second thread follows the children as they prepare for the National Music Competition, an annual event where 20,000 schools compete. The camp's school is the clear underdog, and is competing for the first time. The competition forms the film's narrative arc, but Fine's intimate camerawork gives it an added dimension, showing the process of healing that gets underway as the kids joyfully throw themselves into the music.

There is natural beauty and artful framing throughout *War/Dance*: in the wide shots of Uganda's mountains swaddled in mists; in the close-ups of Dominic's hammering xylophone mallets; in low-angle shots of government soldiers silhouetted against a stormy sky; and in slow-motion images of the Bwola tribal dance, an intoxicating swirl of white feathers, ebony skin and brightly colored beads. "We heard some criticism [at Sundance] that the film looked too



pretty, that we must have staged things," says Fine. "That hurt, because I pride myself on working fast, on being there at the moment something happens. Despite the real dangers of filming in a refugee camp in a war zone, I still had to get the story. My training in other war zones and extreme environments has given me the ability to capture moments as they happen.

"As documentarians, it's our job to capture reality," he continues. "For instance, the first shot is a truck [full of kids] coming toward you, out of focus. That organically came from me looking in the rear-view mirror and seeing that truck in the dust behind us, then jumping out, having maybe 20 seconds to get my

camera ready, and then, with a 420mm lens, rack focus as the truck was coming at me at 40 mph. I take a lot of pride in capturing those moments." Nix Fine adds, "It's unfortunate that the visual language of documentaries has become so restrictive that you almost start to question the reality of something if somebody knows how to compose a shot. There are reasons we chose our visual style. Our mission was to make the biggest impact, and we do that through how Sean shoots."

When Shine Global commissioned *War/Dance* — part of the nonprofit's effort to raise awareness about child abuse and exploitation around the world — shooting on HD was a given, and Fine chose



*War/Dance* photos courtesy of Shine Global. Fine photo by Jossie Swantek.