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Chapter 1 The Reluctant Hero of Darfur, the Movie

By JOHN ANDERSON

THE HOLOCAUST,” [Stanley Kubrick](#) once said, “is about six million people who get killed. ‘Schindler’s List’ was about 600 people who don’t.” Despite the acclaim afforded [“Schindler’s List,”](#) [Steven Spielberg’s](#) 1993 Oscar winner, its venerable dramatic strategy — addressing a tragedy of the many via the actions of a few — didn’t quite get to the heart of darkness. At least not for Kubrick.

[“The Devil Came on Horseback,”](#) which opened Wednesday in New York, has similar issues: genocide, for one. The documentary, directed by Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern, concerns the ongoing crisis in the [Darfur](#) region of Sudan, where atrocities continue to be committed on many sides, including the rape and murder of black Africans by the Arab Janjaweed (“devils on horseback”). And it focuses on a lone hero, Brian Steidle, an ex-marine captain who served as an observer for the [African Union-United Nations](#) peacekeeping force, took photographs of the atrocities being perpetrated and eventually published them in The New York Times.

That Mr. Steidle, a white, middle-class American from a military family, is the focus of a movie about a black-African catastrophe, is something that might rankle some audiences. If there were a show of hands, Mr. Steidle’s would be the first one up.

“The hardest part for me during the filming,” said Mr. Steidle, 30, “was when we were shooting in Rwanda, during a commemoration of the genocide there. There were huge ceremonies, people crying, people lighting candles. And

here's this one camera, in the dark, with a bright, white spotlight, and it's pointed at me, one of only about 10 white people who were there.

"I'm very sensitive to it," he said. "But they convinced me that the best way to tell the story is through me."

For Ms. Stern and Ms. Sundberg the engine of "[The Devil](#)" was urgency: their previous film, "[The Trials of Darryl Hunt](#)," about a celebrated miscarriage of justice in North Carolina, had taken 13 years to finish and was released only last month. The impact of their film about Mr. Steidle would be directly proportionate to the speed in which it was completed. How they drew attention to Darfur, and through whom, was immaterial.

"Before people see the film, they say, 'Oh, it's another story about a white man in Africa,' " said Ms. Stern. "But when they come out of it, they don't feel that way. Because it's Brian's personal journey, because they're struck by Brian's humanity. And the fact he had such a legitimate role and purpose in being in Darfur really grounds his story."

Mr. Steidle had been stationed in Kosovo and various points around the Mediterranean when the United States was attacked in September 2001. He said that his unit, rather than returning to Afghanistan, was replaced by fresh troops; Mr. Steidle was sent home. Promoted early to captain, he faced what he said would be seven years behind a desk before a battalion assignment.

Restless, he opted for a job he found on the Internet: monitoring the ceasefire in Sudan between the Khartoum government and southern rebel forces. When developments in Darfur started to become public, he headed west as an observer for the African Union. It was there that he took the photographs that were eventually published in The Times.

"For us it was the right story at the wrong time," Ms. Sundberg said. "We were still deeply entrenched in 'Hunt,' and Brian was so incredibly shell-shocked. You could tell he was devastated by what he'd seen. And it was the double damage of having taken the risk of going forward with the photographs and not seeing any actual response."

“He had this marine mentality,” she added. “He’d come out with all these damning photographs, very little happened, and he was very insistent that we make this film as quickly as possible. And it’s funny: Given documentary-filmmaking turnaround, it was fast. But for Brian it was like watching paint dry.”

Ms. Stern said she and Ms. Sundberg were shooting and editing both films at the same time. “We came back from Sundance after showing ‘Hunt’ and began shooting this. That summer we edited it and went to Sundance this January. The film was literally done days before it screened. We couldn’t afford the luxury of waiting for funding, so we had to make it a different way — basically borrowing money and looking for investors.”

In addition to the documentary, a book, “The Devil Came on Horseback: Bearing Witness to Genocide in Darfur,” by Mr. Steidle and his sister, Gretchen Steidle Wallace, was published in March by PublicAffairs.

But Mr. Steidle isn’t ready to rest. He’s now got Hollywood in his sights.

Reached at his new home in Santa Monica, where he moved in order to collaborate on a feature film of his story to be produced by 72 Productions ([“Transamerica”](#)), Mr. Steidle said that a dramatic version should raise public awareness to a new level.

Documentaries “reach a certain number of people,” he said. “And we’ll reach even more with the book. But features, even if people don’t see them, they hear about them.” He cited [“Blood Diamond,”](#) the 2006 movie about civil war in Sierra Leone starring [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) — another white guy in an African story.

From Joseph Conrad through [“The Last King of Scotland,”](#) popular stories about Africa have often had white men at their center, the simple reason being that many filmmakers believe it is the most expedient way to reach a mainstream and therefore influential audience.

“I’m seeing it all the time,” said Orlando Bagwell, a director of the [PBS](#) series “Eyes on the Prize” and the deputy director of the [Ford Foundation](#)’s media,

arts and cultural unit. “I’ve filmed in Africa many times, and I urge filmmakers to get African partners, to understand how complex Africa is. You can be in a situation where you think you know what’s going on, but you’re not catching it all.

“I think the intentions of a lot of white filmmakers are good. They see a moral issue and want to address it. But issues there are viewed through different lenses.”

Is it antithetical to have a white American protagonist in a movie about Darfur? “Sure,” said Nicholas Kristof, the columnist for *The Times* who has written extensively on Darfur and was instrumental in getting Mr. Steidle’s pictures published on his paper’s Op-Ed pages. “Will it help draw attention to the issues and get the message out? Again, sure.”

Unlike Mr. Steidle, Mr. Kristof said he was actually “pleasantly surprised” at the reaction the pictures generated when they appeared in the spring of 2005. “Those pictures represented a milestone and helped galvanize a response,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to call it an entirely healthy response. People were still being killed and raped. But we run the risk of the public thinking that the response has been useless. The truth is that hundreds of thousands of people have been saved by the outcry. You go to refugee camps now, and you see a lot of people who would otherwise be dead.”

Mr. Steidle said he is happy with the film despite his discomfiture at being center stage. “I’m the next-door neighbor,” he said of his role in the movie. “I’d like to see more African-Americans involved in the issue, but it’s about what community I can influence.” Namely, he added, white middle-class voters who might actually call their representatives in Congress and urge action on Darfur.

“Over all,” Mr. Steidle said, “I thought that the pictures would have moved people to do something more. I hoped that there would have been more done. It’s had some effect, but if you ask if we’ve been able to help the people on the ground, the answer is no. They’re not safer. They’re still dying.”