



'Sparkle' doesn't
Movie's music sizzles,
but story is overdone
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Into Africa

Newfoundlander's first documentary focuses on South Sudanese youth

By Gay Decker

SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

The first-time documentary film by Newfoundlander Matthew LeRiche opens with a dimly lit closeup of young man rapping smoothly into the camera.

He's young; he's hip; he's the future of South Sudan.

"We need to make changes. Let's start with some better fashion, that starts with the government of self-satisfaction," he rhymes.

His name is L.U.A.L. and aside from being a spoken word poet, he's an accountant who used to work for Deloitte and who's now trying to figure out how to make his music and still pay the bills.

It's a familiar situation for many young artists, except that L.U.A.L. lives in a country that has suffered the longest-running civil war in history, and which, despite its independence a year ago, is still undergoing assaults from its former countrymen.

Given this context, and the fact that 53 per cent of the people in South Sudan are under the age of 18, LeRiche and his filmmaking partner, Viktor Pesenti, wanted their film to focus on how the country's youth find hope in everyday activities.

"We are at the same stage of our lives where we are trying to figure out what to do with ourselves," he says. "Most people are interested in trying to do something that can have impact. Something positive they can feel excited about."

In addition to profiling artists, the film introduces the viewer to a



Matthew LeRiche (in blue jacket) conducts an interview for his next documentary on literacy in South Sudan. On his left, partner Viktor Pesenti is filming. — Submitted photo

“It cuts to the core of so much of what it is to be human, really . . . of trying to understand why you're somewhere and why things happen. But I think it's that everybody has these astronomically amazing stories and every time you drive somewhere, everywhere you look, there's something beautiful, something very stark and genuine and real about the place.”

Matthew LeRiche, documentary filmmaker

very professional looking Sudanese basketball team and an equally well-organized women's cultural group.

These telling snapshots are interspersed with eloquent comments from politically active youth on the need to work together and to

be open to the outside world. The result is a more holistic view of life in South Sudan than can be conjured by a news clip.

LeRiche, who has a PhD in war studies from King's College London and has been living in South Sudan on and off for the past eight years, says people often have a distorted view of what war is really like.

"It's not like it is in films. It's very much more like a slow oppression. The economy slows and people have trouble accessing basic

resources. Those are the things that kill people and stop development," he says.

The name of the film, "South Sudan: The World's Youngest Nation," also refers to the country's independence from Sudan on July 9, 2011, making it the newest nation on the globe.

In addition to the film, LeRiche has recently published a book entitled "South Sudan: From Revolution to Independence."

He acknowledges that his in-depth study of the country's development, coupled with his experiences living there, has had a profound impact on his worldview and, in particular, how he thinks about rural development in Newfoundland.

"It helps you understand the reality that nothing is determined. Things can be undone pretty quickly and things can be built," he says. "Our conversations at home about rural development are essential, but we have spent a lot of time being caught up in the past and not really dreaming about what we want this place to look like."

"Without that you won't have anything. That sort of engagement and vision and hope for the future, however utopian, is essential for progress. . . . The thing that sustains people here is, in fact, that."

After so much time in South Sudan, LeRiche says it feels like a part of him now, noting its pull on him is elemental.

"It cuts to the core of so much of what it is to be human, really . . . of trying to understand why you're somewhere and why things happen," he says. "But I think it's that everybody has these astronomically amazing stories and every time you drive somewhere, everywhere you look, there's something beautiful, something very stark and genuine and real about the place."

LeRiche's film will be shown at the Africa World Documentary Film Festival in London, England, from Aug. 30 to Sept. 9 and may also air across Africa via a satellite channel this year.



Matthew LeRiche in South Sudan. — Submitted photo

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