

Meet the 2012 Sundance Filmmakers #9: Eugene Jarecki, 'The House I Live In'

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"The House I Live In" director Eugene Jarecki

Documentary filmmaker and Sundance staple Eugene Jarecki (his last film "Reagan" premiered at the festival in 2011 and his 2005 film "Why We Fight" won the Sundance Grand Jury Prize) is back this year with "The House I Live In" (U.S. Documentary competition), a comprehensive work that delves into the war on drugs.

What it's about: Filmed in more than 20 states, "The House I Live In" tells the stories of individuals at all levels of America's war on drugs.

Says director Jarecki: "I've been preparing to make this film for over 20 years. But its seeds were planted in my childhood. I first met Nannie Jeter, one of the film's main characters, when I was just a few days old coming home from the hospital. From that day on, she became a second mother to me, and her children and grandchildren a second family. Growing up in the wake of the civil rights movement, I thought we were all living in a kind of post-racial America – a place of new equality and opportunity. But as we grew older, I saw our paths diverge – where I as a white American found opportunity and privilege, they as African-Americans met a new kind of struggle that reemerged for black people in the

post-civil rights era.

"This struggle holds particular significance for me, since my own family came to America fleeing persecution in Europe. From an early age, I was taught that my life would only have meaning if I brought the knowledge of this experience to bear in the defense of those suffering in today's world. Naturally, watching people I love encounter challenges in America made me want to understand what was hurting them. And the more I looked, the more clear it became that first drugs and then the war waged against them were the primary forces behind their pain.

"The film is extremely personal for me in that it tells the stories of people I care greatly about and explores forces in American life that are deeply saddening. It tells very intimate and tender stories of people whose lives have been impacted by the war on drugs, but it also puts these stories in an historical context, sharing with the viewer a wide canvas that was painted for me by the many experts who gave their time to appear in the film. This is a challenging combination, because it means the film seeks to work on both emotional and intellectual wavelengths at the same time.

"The art of this, which I also faced in 'Why We Fight,' was in balancing the emotional and intellectual aspects in way that would create the most moving, gripping, and far-reaching film I can. There is so much to say about the drug war that part of this challenge, too, was in simply reining in the vast amount of footage we shot, experiences we had, and reflections that were shared with us into a manageable length. I like movies that are short enough that when people leave the theater, the night is still young and there's still time for people to talk long and deep about their thoughts and reactions

"Between escalating violence in Mexico and recent legislative upheavals regarding drug sentencing and even limited legalization, the role of illegal drugs in American society and the war against their users and distributors is at the forefront of the national conversation. It needs to stay there until real change begins in earnest. I believe this is a pivotal moment for such change and my hope is that people's reaction to the film is both an emotional one – moved by the characters and their heartbreaking stories – and an intellectual one – aware that only with public opposition will the forces that drive this system be prevented from continuing to damage so many American lives."