

Sundance film 'Triage' centers on doctor's work in war-torn lands

By [Anthony Breznican](#), USA TODAY

http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/movieawards/sundance/2008-01-25-triage_N.htm

PARK CITY, Utah — Dr. James Orbinski is a physician who would actually like to raise your blood pressure.

The Nobel Prize recipient and former head of Doctors Without Borders is at the Sundance Film Festival with his documentary *Triage*, chronicling his work in the war-ravaged lands of Somalia and Rwanda and his rage at a world that is often indifferent to the horrors.

In recent years, Sundance has had success with social-conscience documentaries. It has become a launching pad for such films as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Who Killed the Electric Car?* and the recent Oscar-nominated *War/Dance*, about child soldiers in Nigeria who reclaim their innocence through music and dance.

"It's a bit of a slogan that Sundance has, but I think it's very true," says *Triage* director Patrick Reed. "In this small place, the entire world comes. It's a great gathering place and a great opportunity to connect with other people and explore some of the issues."

He is also, naturally, hoping to land a distributor who can help the film reach a wider audience. "You make films like this to find an audience. You don't make activist films for activists," Reed says. "You hope it speaks on a very universal level to a general audience."

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Triage: Dr. James Orbinski's Humanitarian Dilemma gets its name from the emergency medical practice of separating wounded into three groups — those who must be treated immediately, those who must be treated within the day, and those who must be made comfortable because there is no hope they'll survive.

It's something he has had to do often over the years, sometimes with refugees numbering in the tens of thousands. That compromise, allowing some to die so others can live, serves as the movie's metaphor.

Triage shows that to get his job done, he often has to bargain with warlords, narcotics traffickers and despots, who loot his food, funds and drugs for themselves and use them to fuel more misery. The trickle down of treatment is the best he can hope for in a world that, from its pharmaceutical companies to its presidents, often serves only its own interests.

The Canadian physician's harrowing stories are seemingly endless, but he keeps going back to Africa. Now he's focusing on the AIDS crisis with his Dignitas International aid group.

"Any experience of any kind, if it's genuinely lived, will change you," he says, standing inside snow-topped tent after a recent screening. "My experiences over the years are unusual, and in many ways extreme, and they have certainly changed me. There's no question about that."

He said he is just now finishing his memoir, reading over drafts while in Park City. He hopes to draw attention to the need for more non-governmental support for humanitarian relief efforts, which he believes are more effective and less destructive than governments sending in troops.

Orbinski believes there is a growing hunger in regular people to contribute to the world instead of just take from it, and he says the film can tap this by trying to raise their political awareness and persuade them to support non-governmental organizations like Dignitas or Doctors Without Borders.

The film, in a literal sense, shows the difference one person can make. And in a film festival full of celebrities, music and decadence, *Triage* is managing to strike a nerve.

"If you look at the questions that emerge from the film, they are some of the most important questions of the day," Orbinski says. "They deal with religion, they deal with our responsibility as human beings, our responsibilities as citizens. ... People are, in many ways, looking for some way forward, and I think the value of the film is it provokes that kind of question. When people ask those kinds of questions, they come to an answer."

That's when, he says, they start changing the way they vote, live and give back.

As a screen presence, Orbinski is practically Schindler-esque, but the movie reveals the occasional moment of humor. In one scene, walking through the ruins of their old house, he asks a Somali friend if he remembers all the times they watched *Rambo* in that room together.

What was it about Sylvester Stallone butchering the bad guys that so inspired them?

He laughs: "It was the only movie we had."