

Zwick and Crew Make Sacrifices for Story

December 8, 2008 | By [Mary Ann Skweres](#)

In *Defiance* **Edward Zwick** tells the true story of three Jewish brothers (**Daniel Craig**, **Liv Schreiber** and **Jamie Bell**) who take refuge in the Belarussian forest after members of their family are massacred during an ethnic purge of their village during World War II. As a means of survival when other civilian refugees wander into their camp, they form a village deep in the woods and join with Russian partisans in resisting the Germans. Because the film was produced independently, Zwick and his crew took significant cuts in salary, making sacrifices for the sake of getting the movie made.

Below the Line: What piqued your interest in this true story?

Edward Zwick: My childhood friend **Craig Roman** read an obituary in *The New York Times* and brought it to me. It was the story about the death of Zus the middle brother played by Liv Schreiber in the film. The article told a bit of his story. Afterwards we found a book called *Defiance* by **Nechama Tec**, a professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut.

We optioned the book and began researching from there, meeting members of the family, looking up other memoirs, and reading about the period. There was a lot that we could dig into about that moment and that particular group.

BTL: Even with your track record, I understand it was still difficult for you to find funding to produce this film.

Zwick: That's increasingly typical of dramas and period pieces. I think the Holocaust is a particularly difficult subject in any case, but we were determined to get there. I think the real reason that this film came together, is that the last couple of films I made had done well in Europe, so we found a company named **Grosvenor Park** that was willing to finance the movie. We sold the territories to European distributors and they gapped the difference. We came back to the United States fully financed and got domestic distribution through **Paramount Vantage**.

It was remarkable to see people willing to commit for the sake of something that they wanted to do. The grips were the same grips that I worked with in South Africa. They'd never seen snow. After the first snowfall, we had a snowball fight. The crew included **James Newton Howard** [composer], **Steven Rosenblum** [editor], **Eduardo Serra** [cinematographer] and **Jenny Beavan** [costume designer]. These are remarkable people who are working at the tops of their fields. They did the film with remarkably little. They brought their keys, but worked with a Lithuanian crew. Eduardo had the camera operators and the ACs he wanted, but the grips ended up working with a lot of Lithuanians, many of whom they helped to train during the process.

BTL: You had previously worked with your DP Eduardo Serra on *Blood Diamond*. How was it working with him again?

Zwick: It was a very happy relationship. We went about the work in the same way we do anything. It begins with a lot of conversations, some research. We look at photographs. We scout together, and in that scout so much is revealed. In Lithuania, which is a northern latitude, the declension of the sun is very low, the hours are short and the forest is deep. We decided very early that the key would be to keep the sun out of the movie. We chose locations that were in these bowls or blocked off with trees. Because the light was so low, we decided to shoot the movie 1:85. That meant we could have much faster lenses, the fastest lens available. We then pushed the film several stops. We went for a real consistency—a very dark, very imminent feel, not high key in anything.

BTL: That works for the mood of the story.

Zwick: Exactly right. And then of course, we all worked together. Jenny Beavan and I talked about colors. We talked about the worn look of the clothes. With **Dan Weill** [production designer] we talked about how to create that monochromatic feel without doing anything gaggy, but letting it come naturally so it looks much more real and authentic. We figured out how to do that artfully with the color in the woods. Also, how we timed the movie, how we timed the greens and the chroma of the green, how Jenny chose costumes with different shades, shade on shade, and different accents, it was pretty carefully thought out.

BTL: You have worked with your editor Steven Rosenblum forever. Do you even have to talk to him or does he know exactly what you want?

Zwick: Steve and I were in film school together. He cut my student film. We've worked together for 30 years. Of course we talk. The pleasure of it is to be able to sit in that small, dark room together for about four months and yell at each other and talk about anything. We love to talk about the

film, to cut it together, to struggle with his ideas and my ideas, and to maybe come up with a third idea that is better than either of ours. It's really one of the joys.

Steve was there with me the whole time in Lithuania. We were seeing dailies every night and talking about what's working and what's not. His first cut is very much a response to what I shot. He doesn't do an assembly. He gets us farther along in that first edit. He's talented and our points of view are similar. I'll be shooting and he'll put the film together. When I come to the cut, it has a very strong statement, which would be his statement. Then we begin from there. That's the fun of it, to say, 'That may have been my intention, but here's a different way to do it.' Together we'll struggle our way through. The process is more organic than formal.

BTL: You worked with composer James Newton Howard for the first time on *Blood Diamond*. What made you want to work with him again?

Zwick: Yes, but again that was a very happy relationship. We talked about this one from the very beginning. James even began writing sketches as we were prepping the movie. He was very into the research of that Eastern European vernacular and trying to find a voice for this movie. The violin is the sound of what was lost in Eastern Europe and the sound of Jewish culture, in fact. And yet, not to play upon the clichés of that, because that would be very easy, what he does, which is masterful, is to find a very austere way with the music. It became more like a chamber orchestra than a big symphony orchestra by the time we ended up doing it. The great thing about James is that he is enthusiastic. He has the right amount of insecurity and tentativeness. He sweats the material. He doesn't take anything for granted, and yet he does come from abundance. He is a realist and is willing to throw things out for the sake of other things. He's really a joy, and again like Steve, he's fun to hang around with in those close groups and that's important too.

The other person from *Blood Diamond* that I have to talk about is Jenny Beavan, who is a goddess. I had worked with **Ngila Dickson** a couple of times before, and whom I really love, but she wasn't available. I asked Ngila, 'Who's the one person you don't want me to work with because I'll fall in love with her?' And she said, 'You absolutely can't work with Jenny Beavan.' Jenny was just sublime—so resourceful, so much fun, so into the story and working on these characters and, within the realm of authenticity, making those costumes so full of character. She adds a great deal to the movie.

BTL: The sound design was outstanding, especially the weaponry.

Zwick: I first started working with **Lon Bender** when we did *Glory*. He is acknowledged to be one of the masters, together with **Andy Nelson**, with whom I've done, I think, seven films. These guys are so attuned to story. They really tried to find the sound of those woods, the little sounds of the different kinds of wind, and what it sounds like when you walk on snow compared to other surfaces. The little things are so important. They worked very hard to get the sounds of the guns and explosions right, not to make them hokey, not to make them Hollywood, but to make them dry and real. Lon came to Lithuania to record period sound, to record those guns and to go into those woods. He was quite determined to find that reality.

BTL: Is there anyone else that you could not have done without?

Zwick: The people that I want to talk about would be the grips. They're called the **Dragon Grips**. They were formed by a guy named **Guy Micheletti**. I've worked with the best in the world and these guys rivaled them. They were tireless. We had such difficult circumstances, humping in and out of forests very far away from roads and everything. What they were able to accomplish in a short time was truly remarkable. Everybody felt that way. They certainly deserve mention, that's for sure.

Also, the two camera operators that I've worked with twice before, **Mike Proudfoot** and **Klemens Becker**, are two of the finest operators working. We ran two cameras the whole time. It wasn't like there were an A and a B operator. They were really a tag team. It was a great experience.