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By Rob Thomas

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Just in case all the fictional bloodshed and carnage in "Blood Diamond" isn't depressing enough for you, go ahead and pop over to Westgate to see a gut-wrenching documentary take on the same subject, "The Empire in Africa."

Actually, it's a fascinating experience to see both films within a day of each other, as I did. "Blood Diamond" does a noble job trying to fashion the horrors of the civil war in Sierra Leone into a Hollywood entertainment that's both exciting and honest. But seeing Philippe Diaz's true-life examination of the war is a grisly reminder that real war is far bloodier and far messier than the Hollywood version.

Diaz's take on the war, which raged through the West African nation for almost all of the 1990s, killing an estimated 70,000 innocent civilians and displacing almost 2 million, is also radically different from the accepted history that "Blood Diamond" follows. The world has always seen the rebel Revolutionary United Front as the villains of the conflict, murdering and maiming civilians and conscripting young boys into becoming "child soldiers."

By talking to principals on all sides of the issue (including RUF higher-ups who died under suspicious circumstances after the interviews were done), Diaz comes up with a much more complex take on the conflict. He argues that the RUF's initial goals were to redistribute the vast wealth from the country's rich natural resources, including gold and diamonds, the fruits of which went to a wealthy and corrupt few while the rest of the country remained impoverished.

Diaz believes that the international community's intervention, including the installation of a regional force, ended up dragging out the conflict and costing more lives, all in the name of protecting the international community's interests in Africa. He also accuses that regional force of committing atrocities itself, and the film includes graphic footage of one young boy being beaten and unarmed prisoners being executed by soldiers.

While this interpretation at times comes dangerously close to whitewashing the RUF's own crimes, Diaz does effectively make his case, allowing everyone involved in the conflict -- from relief workers and soldiers to government officials, diplomats and especially ordinary citizens -- time before the camera. The viewer ultimately comes away with a sobering awareness that not every conflict has heroes and villains and that the international community's best shot at peace may not be to choose and arm the "right" side, but to get everybody to the negotiating table.

Diaz skillfully blends the interviews and footage he shot on the ground in Sierra Leone effectively, with haunting indigenous music and narration by musician Richie Havens. There are images in "The Empire in Africa" that I wish I'd never seen, but it's worth enduring them to hear a side of the story that the media and Hollywood overlooked.

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