

Blood Diamond 2006



To an extent, *Blood Diamond* is a victim of its own length. While the film includes a number of disturbing political and sociological insights, the adventure story is tepid and loses momentum as the storyline bogs down. The main character, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, has an effective arc that is believable because it does not force him to act contrary to his nature, but it takes a long time for *Blood Diamond* to get us to DiCaprio's moment of recognition. Pacing issues aside, this is a well constructed movie - clearly the product of a director who understands how to make a top-notch motion picture. It looks great and sounds great. If only Edward Zwick's mastery of the medium had extended to pruning the screenplay and editing the final result, *Blood Diamond* might have been a tremendous film rather than one worthy of only a lukewarm recommendation.

The story takes place in 1999 Sierra Leone, when the country is embroiled in a civil war. In this struggle, it's hard to determine which side is worse: the government or the rebels. As is often the case in this sort of bloodbath, atrocities abound and it's the innocent farmers and villagers caught in between who pay the price. Diamonds, one of the country's largest exportable commodities, are being smuggled out and purchased on the open market despite a supposed international ban on the purchase of so-called "conflict diamonds" or "blood diamonds." This historical background (which is more complicated as presented in the movie) is accurate, although the three primary characters embroiled in events are fictional.

Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou) is a loving husband and father who lives a peaceful existence on a farm in an out-of-the-way community in Sierra Leone. He sends his young son, Dia (Caruso Kuypers), to a school to learn English so the boy will grow up to have a better life. One day, terror comes to Solomon's village when the rebels arrive and kill or capture nearly everyone living there. Solomon's family is ripped from him and he is sent to work harvesting diamonds. While sifting through sand from a shallow river bottom, he discovers a 100-karat pink diamond, which he initially hides then later buries. Shortly thereafter, he is captured during a government raid and sent to jail. While there, he encounters South African "soldier of fortune" Danny Archer (Leonardo

DiCaprio), who makes a deal with Solomon: for the diamond, he will help the man find his wife and children. To achieve this aim, Archer goes for help to American journalist Maddy Brown (Jennifer Connelly), whose price for aid is a tell-all expose from Archer about how "dirty" diamonds are laundered to appear clean to the world market, and how much culpability the London diamond merchants have.

That's a gross oversimplification of what happens during *Blood Diamond's* first 45 minutes. This is a narratively dense picture that requires constant attention from the audience. As an action/adventure tale, the film has its high points, but there are times when the movie feels like it's spinning its wheels. Director Edward Zwick (*Glory*, *The Last Samurai*) is no stranger to epic films, but none of his previous features have felt as long as this one.

The film is uncompromising in the way it depicts the Sierra Leone conflict (which is fundamentally similar to the many wars that have recently dotted the African continent). We see the mass slaughter of innocents as both the government and the rebels mow down men, women, and children indiscriminately. We see how the rebels recruit young boys, indoctrinate them through torture and drug use, and turn them into hardened killers. Patriotism is equated with a high body count. There's something disturbing about the sight of a ten-year old boy firing an automatic rifle into a crowd of unarmed, panicked people. *Blood Diamond* is as effective in depicting the corruption of innocents as it is in showing the harrowing hell of this kind of war. It also highlights the greed and manipulation that characterizes the international diamond market.

Two of the three characters are well developed. Archer has the most complete arc. Thankfully, he never loses his "me first" attitude, but we come to understand how it has developed and we see a gradual softening of some of his morals. It's a solid performance from Leonardo DiCaprio, who has grown into this sort of "gritty" role and is more believable after having been seen dancing on the dark side in *The Departed*. This is not the same actor who set young female hearts aflutter ten years ago. He has discovered a measure of gravitas.

Unlike Archer, Solomon doesn't have an arc. He's single-minded in his focus: find his wife, two daughters, and son. His passion drives the movie forward; when *Blood Diamond* has urgency, it's because of him. Djimon Hounsou is volcanic in this role. Less substantive is the part of Maddy Brown, who's in less than half of the movie (she is absent from the final third). Jennifer Connelly does the best she can with the clichéd part of an idealistic journalist, but the writing isn't there and Maddy ends up being largely forgettable - a character necessitated by the plot rather than a living, breathing human being. At least there's the hint of a spark between Connelly and DiCaprio, which keeps things interesting when they're together.

Blood Diamond is a mixed bag - a movie that has its share of stark, unforgettable moments but whose substance never fully gels. Despite the participation of two marquee topping actors and the strength of the director's resume, it's hard to imagine there's much of an audience for a movie fueled more by the politics of African atrocities than the adrenaline and testosterone cocktail that typically characterizes this sort of film. The film's length works against it, but there's enough here to warrant a recommendation, even if it's not the most enthusiastic one I have ever given to a Zwick production.