

Violence, sap burden 'Blood Diamond'

By Kam Williams
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a soldier of fortune from Zimbabwe, is in destabilized Sierra Leone to exchange arms for diamonds with the highest bidder, whether that be the government or the rebel led Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

You see, this White Rhodesian is bitter about the loss of a birthplace he still refers to by its colonial name. So, he couldn't care less how much blood is shed during Sierra Leone's interminable civil war, so long as the violence is basically Black versus Black, and he is able to profit from the incessant slaughter.

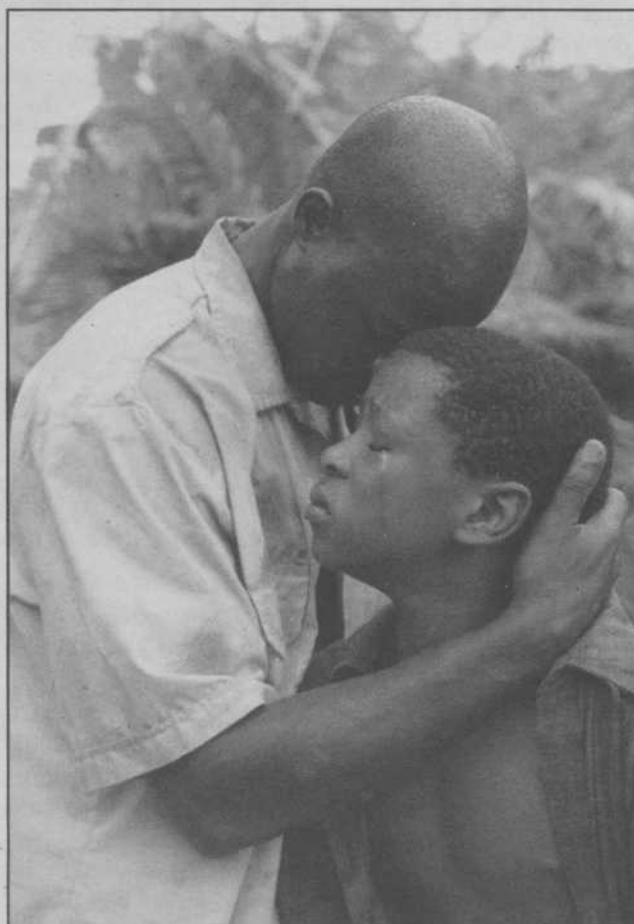
By contrast, Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou) is a local fisherman from the Mende tribe who would like nothing more than to leave his homeland, but, first, he

has to find his family that has vanished amidst the chaos, and he has no idea whether they're dead or alive.

Luckily, Solomon had the good fortune to find a priceless stone while being forced to dig for diamonds at gunpoint by the outlawed RUF. The problem is that he had to bury the gem on the mining site, because he would have been executed on the spot, if caught stealing.

Meanwhile, Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly), an intrepid American journalist, is in the country doing research for an exposé she wants to write on the role that the diamond industry plays in the continuing controversy by its unethical emphasis on profits over principles.

It's hard to see how the fates of these three strangers, Danny, Solomon and Maddy, might become intertwined, but that is exactly what tran-



Djimon Hounsou performs admirably in "Blood Diamond."

spires in "Blood Diamond," a taut, if simplistically drawn thriller directed by Edward Zwick ("Glory").

Set in Sierra Leone in 1999, the movie is essentially a high body-count, action adventure despite its political potboiler pretensions. Fortunately, those interested in a more cerebral examination of the subject matter need look no further than the informative documentary "Empire in Africa," also currently in theaters.

Though filmed in Mozambique and South Africa, "Blood Diamond" is pure Hollywood, a hair-raising roller coaster ride rife with gunplay and pyrotechnics. Plus, it comes multi-layered with sentimental subplots at every turn, from the unlikely-buddy relationship between Danny and Solomon to a budding romance between Maddy and Danny to Maddy's

maternalistic concern for the whereabouts of Solomon's kin.

Turns out his wife (Benu Mabheba) and children are in a refugee camp, except for one son (Caruso Kaypers) who has been kidnapped and brainwashed by the rebels. Seemingly impervious to bullets, again and again, our heroes manage to emerge unscathed from dire scenarios where everyone else is dropping like flies.

DiCaprio, Hounsou and Connelly turn in decent performances, even if in service of a flick where they're upstaged by ubiquitous savagery. Ultimately, all the loose ends of this well-meaning fairy tale are tied together nicely, albeit a tad too sappily for those who know what a hellhole of ethnic cleansing Sierra Leone was really like.

Good (2 stars). Rated R for expletives, ethnic slurs, and graphic violence.

Billboard

(Continued from Page 1)

of the year award. "That was a really tough category."

Janet Jackson opened the show with a nod to the old and the new. Sporting a short bob haircut and a belly-baring white turtleneck sweater that offered no chance of wardrobe malfunction, Jackson performed her 1980s classic, "The Pleasure Principle," mixed into "So Excited," a single from her 2006 comeback album, "20 Y.O."

Atlanta rapper T.I. took home rap artist of the year and rap album of the year for his fourth solo album, "King," which debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard albums chart in March.

Gwen Stefani and Black Eyed Peas lead singer Fergie, both with solo efforts this year, also performed.

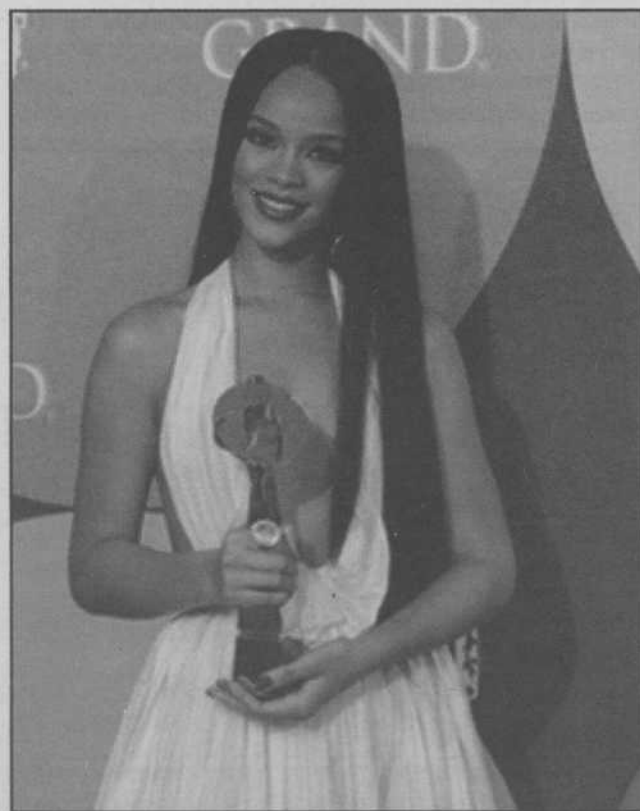
Crooner Tony Bennett was honored with the Billboard Century Award, a lifetime achievement award.

Bennett timed his release of "Duets: An American Classic" — featuring Bono, Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, Barbra Streisand and other musical big-timers — to his 80th birthday. The September release has become the best-selling album of his 50-plus-year recording career.

The Billboard Awards are given to the year's chart-topping artists. Winners are determined by the magazine's year-end chart listings, which are based on record sales and airplay.



Ludacris (above, right) rocks out with Pharrell Williams. Rihanna (left) with the fruits of her labor.



And the winners are:

- Artist of the year: Chris Brown
- New artist of the year: Chris Brown
- Female artist of the year: Rihanna
- Male artist of the year: Chris Brown
- Hot 100 airplay song of the year: "Be Without You," Mary J. Blige
- Female Hot 100 artist of the year: Rihanna
- Pop 100 single of the year: "Promiscuous," Nelly Furtado featuring Timbaland
- Pop 100 artist of the year: Rihanna
- Rap artist of the year: T.I.
- Rap album of the year: "King," T.I.
- Rap album artist of the year: T.I.
- Rap songs artist of the year: T.I.
- Female R&B/hip-hop artist of the year: Mary J. Blige
- R&B/hip-hop artist of the year: Mary J. Blige
- R&B/hip-hop songs artist of the year: Mary J. Blige
- R&B/hip-hop album artist of the year: Mary J. Blige
- R&B hip-hop album of the year: "The Breakthrough," Mary J. Blige
- R&B/hip-hop song of the year: "Be Without You," Mary J. Blige
- R&B/hip-hop song airplay of the year: "Be Without You," Mary J. Blige
- Videoclip of the year: "Be Without You," Mary J. Blige
- Videoclips artist of the year: T.I.

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