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Leonardo DiCaprio is having an excellent autumn. First was his poignant performance in Martin Scorsese's brilliant "The Departed". And he has followed up with another strong performance as a morally ambiguous smuggler in Edward Zwick's "Blood Diamond", a film that once again shows us the senseless violence that has long plagued the African continent. If the Whole of this movie could be even close to the Sum of Its Parts, it would be a high quality film. As it is, it is a bit of a sanctimonious, confusing mess that leaves you entertained, but thinking it should have been much better.

The movie takes place predominately in Sierra Leone, a small nation on the Atlantic coast, and one of the major producers of diamonds. The lust for wealth and power has led to near anarchy, with both rebels and government forces vying for the precious stones to finance their acquisition of more weapons to use upon the other side. Not content in directing their bloodlust at the government troops, the rebels also wage atrocities upon the civilian population, ruthlessly butchering entire villages. Some of the strongest men are spared death or maiming, being sent off to work as slaves in the minefields. The rebels often also spare young boys between the ages of ten and thirteen, indoctrinating them into their army, brainwashing them with lies, drugs, and alcohol to turn them into soulless killing machines.

Due to the atrocities, the international community has attempted to turn their back on "conflict diamonds", refusing to trade with any African country trying to profit off from such misery. Hence the need for people like Danny Archer (DiCaprio), a smuggler and former mercenary who bribes all, supplies weapons to both sides, and smuggles diamonds across the border to Liberia, where they are exported as "legitimate" (the fact that Liberia has no diamond mines of

their own does not seem to concern any of the world leaders).

But Danny's latest smuggling run ended with him getting caught, and all the diamonds confiscated as he is temporarily thrown into jail. This puts him at odds with his boss and mentor known as "The Colonel", a South African strongman who took the teenaged Danny under his wing after his parents were murdered during the civil wars in Zimbabwe (or as Danny keeps referring to it, Rhodesia). Danny's mistake cost the Colonel a lot of money, and he expects Danny to make good on it or pay for it in blood.

This leads to the contrived circumstance of Danny overhearing a conversation in jail between a captured rebel captain, and one of the mine slaves, a noble fisherman named Solomon (Djimon Hounsou). Solomon had discovered a huge pink diamond that would be worth millions to the diamond companies, who are collaborating with the smugglers despite their public proclamations of a boycott. Solomon hid the diamond just before the mine was overrun by government troops, and Danny sees this as an opportunity to secure his financial freedom from the Colonel.

Solomon has his own itinerary; re-uniting with his wife and three children. He does not like nor does trust Danny, but eventually realizes that Danny's connections and money are his only hope. Added to the mix is an American journalist, Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly). She is seeking a unique story line surrounding the civil war, and the knowledge of the illegal smuggling activities of Danny would give her that break. So we have three people blatantly using each other who eventually learn to respect and trust each other with their lives as they pursue their very different agendas.

The acting from the three major characters is exceptional, as I expected it to be, even if Connelly was limited with her part as the mandatory "spunky career woman in danger". DiCaprio continues to show that he is one of the best young actors in the business as his portrayal of Danny exhibits multiple layers of complexity. In a role such as this, it is quite easy to fall back on clichés, as in the standard semi-bad person who gradually changes to a good person by the end of the film. DiCaprio gives a much more nuanced performance than that. You see some of the vulnerability right away in subtle gestures and remarks. His character doesn't really change, it's just that as the film progresses, DiCaprio give you more and more insight into the man, and by the end you have a true understanding of his motives.

Hounsou once again shows amazing acting skills behind his thick African accent.

Helplessness, resolve, anger, passion, and most of all the love he has for his family drives the man throughout the film, and you clearly see every feeling in Hounsou. The only “miss” with his performance is the fault of the director and/or writer. At one point, Solomon does meet back up with his wife and daughters at a refuge camp. However, he seems to almost reject them once he learns that his son is still missing. It is an obvious contradiction to the dignified Solomon to lash out so at his remaining family and this discrepancy is a glaring error in the film.

In truth, the film itself is like Leo’s “Rhodesian” accent; it’s all over the place. It has the makings of an action-adventure flick with all the chase scenes and narrow escapes. It is at times a thriller, with lots of political intrigue and double crosses. And at times it attempts to be a historical drama, documenting the tragedies of the times.

And it is in the last part where the film fails by attempting too much. Zwick is trying to cover three different dramatic plotlines and consequently isn’t able to devote enough time and details to any of them. One is with the conflict diamond issue, showing how these gems are the cause of the problems there, aided by lying diamond magnates who talk about how they won’t deal with them, but still cut back door deals with smugglers, warlords, and mercenaries.

The second is about the tragic practice of kidnapping young boys and turning them into soldiers. Solomon’s son Dia becomes one of these victims, and the details regarding how these children are exploited is heart wrenching. Regrettably, Zwick at one point needs to have you completely forget about having any sympathy for them, as they have to become disposable cannon fodder when the scene calls for a big action sequence involving narrow escapes for Danny and Solomon.

Overkill also seriously disrupts his final dramatic tangent; the indiscriminate killing of civilians by both rebels and government forces. Unlike more dramatic “message” films like “Hotel Rwanda”, Zwick does not get into the political motives for the bloodshed, and both sides are being shown mercilessly gunning down men, women and children without any true insight into why. The shear volume of these killings dull the impact and after the fourth scene showing numerous people dying for no reason, you may tend to stop viewing it as depicting real events, and start seeing it as simply a plot device to ratchet up the tension as if it were a Schwarzenegger movie.

This is not to say that films shouldn’t use tragic real-life events as the background for fictional stories. This can be done quite well, as seen in such diverse films as “Gone with the Wind”,

“Saving Private Ryan”, “Three Kings”, or “Sophie’s Choice”. The trick is to find a balance to where you can appreciate the gravity of the real life events as motivations for the fictional characters. With “Blood Diamond”, these events are shown in such a poorly written and edited manner that in some cases you don’t get enough information to truly understand the situation, or as a worse case are so bombarded by continual action scenes where people are slaughtered that you just become numb. “Oh…I’ve just seen rebels butcher 30 innocent unarmed journalists and natives on a bus, but thank God Leo, Jennifer, and Hounsou got onto the trailing SUV instead and were able to escape”.

In this type of movie; when mass killings are shown several times just to make the audience glad it was someone other than the “stars”, then the director, writer, and editor have failed.

Blood Diamond is good in many ways and many scenes. Had it been edited and directed differently, I probably would have given it a 3 or 3 ½. As it is:

My Rating: Kelly Holcomb (2 footballs). Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots. Rent it on DVD.