

## Murphy's Movie Reviews

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By Ted Murphy

The continent of Africa is much in the news and, of course, in the last several years, it has also become a cause celebre in Hollywood. Films as varied as the Oscar-winning [TSOTSI](#), the Oscar and Emmy nominated *YESTERDAY*, *THE CONSTANT GARDENER*, *HOTEL RWANDA* and *SOMETIMES IN APRIL*, and *CATCH A FIRE*, to name but a handful, have attempted to tell factual or fictional tales drawn from events in the recent past. [BLOOD DIAMOND](#) is among the latest. With a release tied to coincide with the latter film, *THE EMPIRE IN AFRICA* is director Philippe Diaz's nonfiction movie that presents information about the civil war in Sierra Leone that raged officially from 1991 until 2002 (although as one of the many talking heads shown says, the violence can be traced back to the 1980s and earlier.)

Before the out and out civil war, though, the country had enjoyed some prosperity thanks to the mining of diamonds, bauxite, and rutile. Additionally, Sierra Leone was able to produce enough food not only to feed its inhabitants but also to export. Once the internal conflict flared, however, many of the mines were closed and the agriculture of the country was nearly destroyed.

In 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF, pronounced "roof") under the leadership of Foday Sankoh became determined to break the one-party hold on the country. Claiming the government was corrupt and oppressive, the RUF launched attacks which began the devastating civil war. Tens of thousands of inhabitants of the country were killed and over 2 million people fled to neighboring countries. One of the most controversial aspects of Diaz's film is trying to determine exactly who was responsible for the atrocities committed -- most notably, the maiming of countless men, women and children. [Amnesty International reports](#) identified not only the RUF but also its opposition, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), as the perpetrators. *THE EMPIRE IN AFRICA* downplays the involvement of the RUF and instead makes a case that most of the actual atrocities were committed by the United Nations peacekeeping force, many of whom hailed from neighboring Nigeria. The sad truth is that whomever inflicted these heinous and vicious crimes have more or less gotten away with them.

Diaz's sympathies appear to lean toward the RUF -- indeed RUF commander Mike Lamin gets a great deal of screen time -- but the ultimate blame game is one that doesn't matter in the long run. The film contains brutal images of death -- people shot to death as the cameras roll -- and one comes away from watching the movie with a distate and a disgust.

Unfortunately, most residents of the United States don't really care what happens on that continent. Witness the AIDS crisis, the various famines, the civil wars, etc. Unless it has a direct interest or bearing on American interests, the government is slow to take action. There's an uneasy peace that was negotiated in Sierra Leone in 2002,

but the devastation to its economy may take generations -- and even then it may never be able to recapture the level of output prior to the civil war. The bauxite and rutile mines remain closed; only diamonds continue to be mined. The deforestation of the country is impinging on the agricultural output. Sadly, it is a scenario being played out across the continent and in other areas of the world.

***THE EMPIRE IN AFRICA*** has an English narration by Richie Havens. The film requires careful viewing if you are unfamiliar with the country's history. And in the second half, the violence depicted is not for the squeamish (I had to avert my eyes a couple of times). Whatever bias the director has (and every documentarian is biased), the film depicts the savagery that humans are capable of inflicting on one another. That is perhaps the most tragic thing of all.

Rating: B-  
MPAA Rating: NONE  
Running time: 87 mins.

<http://www.murphymoviereviews.net/2006Films/empireafrica.html>