

Zwick on "Blood Diamond"

Producer and director Edward Zwick goes one-on-one with Martin Rapaport.

BY MARTIN RAPAPORT

TEdward Zwick is an American film producer, director and writer—whose career in Hollywood has spanned across four decades. In addition to this year's "Blood Diamond," some of his other notable films include: "The Last Samurai," 2003; "Traffic," 2000; "Shakespeare in Love," 1998; "Courage Under Fire," 1996; "Legends of the Fall," 1994; and "Glory," 1989. Zwick runs The Bedford Falls Company, a film production company, with partner Marshall Herskovitz.

Martin Rapaport: *Why did you make the "Blood Diamond" movie?*

Ed Zwick: The more I learned about what happened in Sierra Leone during the war, the more I was appalled by what I and other people did not know. I realized that in this tiny country [that many could not even find on a map], there existed very big issues that needed to be addressed — issues that would capture the imagination and increase awareness in the world.

MR: *Did the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] get you to do the movie?*

EZ: Oh no. I didn't even meet any of the NGOs until we were well into the preproduction process. The movie came about, as all the things I have done, through detailed research and homework. I looked to NGOs as a source of information just as I looked to members of the diamond industry, ex-mercenaries, victims and journalists. The NGOs were one resource among many.

MR: *Is your film entertainment or education?*

EZ: I don't think those things need to be mutually exclusive. There is a very important Hollywood tradition of



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movies that have a social conscience. If a movie can teach as well as delight, then that enhances the experience of going to the movies.

MR: *In the movie, Danny accuses Maddy of being a journalist who is exploiting suffering to get a good story. Are you exploiting the people of Sierra Leone by making money on this movie?*

EZ: Any time that you tell a story about the suffering of someone else, you risk exploitation. This is a question about which all of us thought long and hard. I think that at the end of the day, all that one has is one's intentions. As I began to talk to people in Sierra Leone, it became clear that they had a great desire and need for this story to be told. Sorious Samura, who made the film

"Cry Freetown," told me that he believed the people of Sierra Leone have never forgiven the children for their role as RUF [Revolutionary United Front] terrorists. He felt that by telling the story of this boy and the terrible things that happened to him, those seeing the movie might come to understand — and perhaps reach forgiveness. That goes for an entire country. The whole principle of truth and reconciliation in South Africa suggests that only by being desperately honest about even the most painful things is there any hope of reconciliation.

MR: *Did you make this movie for the money or are you a new Hollywood NGO?*

EZ: It would have been infinitely easier for me to have made a truly commercial romantic comedy in some sound station in Burbank or in some lovely comfortable circumstance in America. I think that, over time, I have become fortunate enough that the economics of my career are not the driving concern of my career. There are certain stories

that need to be told and this was one of them. I think that, increasingly in America, we have to reckon with the implications of what we do, how we use our resources and how we spend our money. The film is really about the responsibilities of a consumer society and the fact that the purchase of something in one place has implications somewhere else. This place and that place are, in fact, interconnected. By buying something, you're essentially endorsing the practices that are involved in getting and producing it. That is something that I felt that I could, in the concept of this story, talk about.

MR: *Knowing what you do now, would you buy your wife a diamond?*

EZ: Martin, I don't think you want me to answer that question.

MR: *Yes, I do.*

EZ: I have been married for 25 years and that marriage has existed without benefit of needing diamonds to confer upon it some false notion of eternity. Although to my wife, perhaps, the marriage may have at times felt like an eternity, I find it hard to "empiricise" [put a monetary value on] love and equate an object with a relationship. So that particular kind of purchase has never been of great interest to me. But that's not new; it's a personal sensibility that long predates this movie. In any case, I — and the movie — do not suggest that people should stop buying diamonds. The diamond trade is vital to the economies of many African countries. I do have an idea that might be good for diamonds. It occurs to me that the diamond industry has labored brilliantly and long to equate the eternity of a diamond with a relationship. I think they can do just as well by suggesting that a relationship, by virtue of a diamond, could become conflict free.

MR: *Will your movie have an impact on the diamond industry and consumers?*

EZ: Yes. It was only with an increase of public awareness that the Kimberley Process came into being and I think the next steps for taking greater responsibility for what happens in Africa will only come with further awareness. If my film can help raise that awareness, then it will not have been in vain. That being said, I am not Pollyannaish enough to believe that a single film changes everything. The most that a film can do is present a set of iconic images to the culture and precipitate thought, debate and conversation that add to a collective consciousness about a problem. Change happens when a rising tide of voices apply themselves and the aggregate of all those voices and concerns reach a tipping point. So this movie is only one very small part of what I hope is a very large concern.

MR: *What do you think the diamond industry should do about the problems of Sierra Leone?*

EZ: It's very important to say that I first approached this as a historian, journalist and storyteller. That is to say, I was describing events that happened. I don't presume to be an industry insider, economist or expert of any kind. The best that I can do is rely on those who have devoted their lives to trying to understand these issues. Of course, I began to assemble my own point of view. What is clear is that Sierra Leone is a tragedy and that there is complicity in that tragedy on the part of the entire diamond industry. I believe that it is the responsibility of the diamond industry to now act in ways that provide some restitution for that tragedy. It's obvious that the only hope for countries such as Sierra Leone is some kind of sustainable development.

MR: *Were you personally moved by what you learned, saw and experienced?*

EZ: To have seen what I have seen over the course of these past two years has to be called life changing. I think that you cannot spend that amount of time confronting the sights, people and circumstances that we have seen and not be moved and not come to understand some implicit connection between what we do here and what is happening there.

MR: *There seem to be a lot of movies about Africa. Is African social consciousness the new cool?*

EZ: It's important to realize that a filmmaker is in his own universe. This process began over two years ago. It may be more accurate to suggest that Africa is inescapably in the artistic conscientiousness and the fact that I or others might be drawn to want to write about it is not a coincidence. But it has nothing to do with cool. There is nothing cool about spending six months in downtown Maputo, as compared to other opportunities that exist for filmmakers, actors and crew. You have to be motivated by more than being cool to go to the lengths that we went to.

MR: *Would you like to say anything to the diamond industry?*

EZ: I believe that, along with the privileges of being a filmmaker, come certain responsibilities about holding up a mirror to the world and, at times, that mirror is unattractive. I have been the beneficiary of extraordinary privilege and bounty by virtue of what I do for a living. So, too, the diamond industry has reaped extraordinary bounty from Africa. Yet Africa has not shared in that bounty. Somehow that situation needs to be addressed. ♦