

HE'S A CUT ABOVE

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Actor Djimon Hounsou lends his serious nobility to the thriller 'Blood Diamond'

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

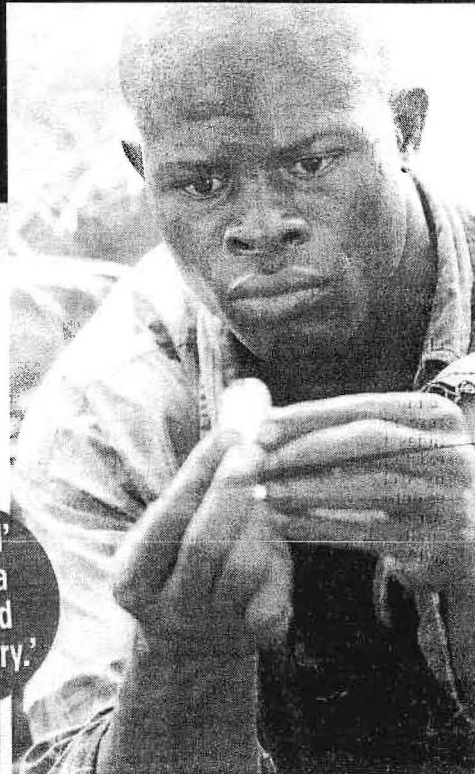
You might think that Djimon Hounsou would get tired of portraying characters so noble, even the young Sidney Poitier might've hesitated to play them.

Hounsou's been a noble slave in "Amistad," a noble warrior opposite Russell Crowe in "Gladiator," another noble warrior opposite Heath Ledger in "Four Feathers" and a noble artist suffering from AIDS in "In America." Now he's a noble father caught up in a civil war, and up against a soldier of fortune's greed, in "Blood Diamond," opening Friday.

But when the discussion turns to the film's many pressing social issues — the diamond industry has even launched a PR campaign to try to convince the world it's already ended the trade in "conflict" diamonds — Hounsou happily sets aside talk of his character and the movie to discuss what really matters to him.

"This is one of the most profound human stories coming out of Africa for me personally," says the 42-year-old actor, who hails from Benin, in Western Africa. "It's not just about diamonds. It's about human refugees and the child soldiers. And it speaks loudly about

'Diamond' is really a 'profound human story.'



the corruption, how these countries get exploited.

"After that's over and the country goes into reconciliation or peace or whatever you want to call it, what do you do with those kids? What does the

MORAL COMPASS In films like the new "Blood Diamond" (l.) and 1997's "Amistad" (r.), Djimon Hounsou has specialized in pure-hearted, honorable characters.



of the historically based drama's better aspects. A six-episode arc on "ER" followed, and he was Oscar-nominated for Best Supporting Actor for his role as an AIDS-stricken Hell's Kitchen denizen in the 2002 immigrant tale "In America."

But after all of these noble roles, Hounsou — who also co-stars in the fantasy adventure "Eragon," out Dec. 15 — says that if he were to do a comedy, it would be fine with him. "I'd love to do a comedy," he says, before confessing,

"But I'm not a funny guy. Maybe I'm too big for comedy."

He has had fun with lighter roles, such as a witch doctor of sorts called Papa Midnite in the Keanu Reeves movie "Constantine" and a sexy repairman in Queen Latifah's "Beauty Shop." Where was the pain, where was the suffering, in "Beauty Shop"?

"I did feel guilty," laughs Hounsou, "because I didn't feel like I was really doing a film!" ♦

country do with those kids that were forced to commit all those atrocities?"

Hounsou's "Blood Diamond" character, Solomon Vandy, wrestles with exactly that dilemma in the film. Estranged from his family and forced to mine the land for rebels, he finds a rare pink diamond and, instinctively, hides it. Upon learning of the rock's existence, cynical arms dealer Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio) latches onto Vandy, looking for a way out of Africa. (Jennifer Connelly plays the casually gorgeous journalist who wants to tell Vandy's story.) Yet all Vandy wants is to find his family and rescue his little boy from the rebels, who've brutalized

the child and turned him into a killer.

Perhaps Hounsou is driven to tell stories about the less fortunate because his own tale is so remarkable. When he was 13, Hounsou fled with his brother to Paris, where they lived on the streets until the designer Thierry Mugler discovered him and put Hounsou on the runway. Soon he was appearing in a Janet Jackson video, which led to a role in the 1994 Kurt Russell-James Spader sci-fi action flick "Stargate."

That led to Steven Spielberg's "Amistad" in 1997, and critics singled out Hounsou's portrayal of Cinque, an African put on trial for leading a bloody revolt on a slave ship in 1842, as one