Sierra Leone presents first film fest

Nation looks to build on nascent film biz

By CHRISTOPHER VOURLIAS

Ten years after the end of a decade-long war that left Sierra Leone in ruins, the small West African nation is stepping onto the global cinematic stage with its first international film festival.

The six-day fest, which kicked off March 29, brought together members of the foreign and local film communities to celebrate film and explore ways to spur growth in the country's nascent film industry.

Fest organizer Layna Fisher says the fest will give an important outlet to the growing number of local filmmakers.

"There's been a big push in the last few years for Sierra Leoneans to ... represent their own culture in films, and tell their own story," Fisher says.

For foreign auds, Sierra Leone is perhaps best known as the backdrop for "Blood Diamond," the Leonardo DiCaprio starrer that fictionalized the country's long-running, diamond-fueled war, but was largely shot in South Africa and Mozambique.

Far from that film's Hollywood glare -- and the catastrophic conflict it depicted -- Fisher says the local industry is rapidly growing. New releases are launched with splashy premiere parties. Guerilla distribution networks push DVDs on street corners. Local helmers including Julius Spencer and Jimmy B are making modest names for themselves internationally, especially in the U.K. And Fisher says discussions are under way with a VOD website for possible online distribution of local pics.

In an impoverished country still rebuilding from the war, the festival offers equal parts entertainment and education. Fisher calls the festival grassroots and capacity-building; a big part of its focus has been to bring local filmmakers, producers, actors and artists together with foreign partners who can help take local films to the international community.

The festival's education partner is WeOwnTV, a non-profit founded by Banker White, producer and co-director of the award-winning doc "Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars." WeOwnTV works with at-risk youths to develop media skills. The Mountain Film Telluride Festival is partnering with the Sierra Leone fest for a program on adventure travel and sustainability. Women Make Movies is sponsoring a program on women's contributions to film around the world. The Global Film Initiative has provided films and also offered extensive support.

The energy of the growing film industry, says Fisher, has been matched by the eager response of audiences in a nation that's still unaccustomed to seeing itself onscreen.

"Sierra Leoneans are naturally born storytellers," she says, "and they're very excited to tell their own tales."

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