

'Performing the Crowd'

Essay on *Rush Hour* by Zoe Sherman, independent curator

Sierra Leone is a West African country and former British colony, ceded to English settlers in 1787 as a safe haven for black soldiers discharged from the British armed forces and also for runaway slaves who had found asylum in London. Today it is rebuilding itself slowly, as a democracy, following a 10-year civil war, which ended in 2001 and cost up to 200,000 lives. As the world's second poorest country, Sierra Leone has little in the way of electricity, running water, paved roads or health and sanitation services, with many people living on the equivalent of one dollar a day.

What does it mean to make *Rush Hour* in this context? The cast of the film, professional actors and extras paid for their work, participated in making the meaning of the film and chose to be involved. With the partnership of Sierra Leone's leading theatre company, the Freetong Players, the artists purchased the acquiescence of the film's cast of two hundred, who readily froze, like 'statues' for the camera in a closed down section of Freetown's busiest thoroughfare, Siaka Stevens Street.

Unlike familiar Western media images of everyday life in impoverished Sierra Leone, the crowd does not appear to be simply homogeneous in their victim-hood. In the pretence of motionlessness, the cast of the film are active participants in what is a theatrical production. The soundtrack – part dramatized "Radio Freetown" phone-in, part reconstructed actuality – discusses the significance to local people of the Bicentenary of the British parliamentary abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and has a sense of spontaneity in its chatter. But the bicentenary wouldn't be of interest to local people. Indeed the callers were actors voicing their own opinions in response to scripted questions. So the underlying premise of the sound-track is a fantasy of how the West would like to imagine the descendents of freed slaves might debate the abolition of the slave trade.

The acquiescence of the performers in *Rush Hour*, who try to stand still for the camera, seems to be a metaphor for the way in which the West defines African people in relation to its own guilt about the transatlantic slave trade. It is an ironic reflection upon how foreign filmmakers objectify Africans, as passive victims. Thus *Rush Hour* is ultimately a self-critical reflection upon the continuing implication of the slave trade in Western media re-presentations of Sierra Leone.

The residual symptom of Western exploitation in media re-presentations of Sierra Leone is to depict a nation defined according to Western criteria in which modern conflicts are symptomatic of underlying historical contradictions. Through the involvement of local people in its making, *Rush Hour* re-presents the colonial legacies and implicit economic interests of the West, inferring that the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in Sierra Leone exists in the prevalence of poverty today.

The presentation of *Rush Hour* to Western art audiences, is a conclusion of this reflexive process. We view a film in which Sierra Leonian actors have chosen, and been paid, to perform for the gaze of the camera and in so doing they embody the guilt about slavery which is implicit in Western media re-presentations of contemporary Africans.