



*Liberian rebel fighter Black Diamond*

## PHENOMENAL WOMEN



*Playwright Danai Gurira, in partnership with Princeton's McCarter Theatre, received a 2008 TCG New Generations grant, which allowed her to travel to Liberia and interview women who had*

*survived the civil wars. In her own words, she describes the woman's image that inspired her journey to Liberia, and the women she found there:*

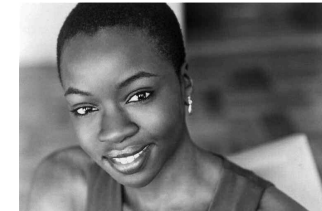
It was really an image that struck me concerning Liberian women and war: a *NY Times* article that had a picture of the Liberian woman rebel fighter, Black Diamond. She's quite well known at this point and her corps of women was quite feared during the Liberian war. They were members of the women's fighting core of LURD, a rebel faction. They were all standing there beautifully, very funkily clad, in jeans and slinky tops and berets and their hair was all well done, and they all had AK-47s slung over their shoulders and very steely glares as they looked into the camera. I honestly had never seen such an image in my life: feminine, glamorous, intimidating, powerful, belligerent, and African. I became completely enthralled. What stories rested behind those eyes. I knew at that moment, I had to endeavor to find out.

We always hear about African war, but we never really hear about women and how they navigate and survive a war terrain. Liberian women did more than survive. The more I researched them, the more complex the experiences of the female rebel fighters proved to be. I was also exposed to another group of Liberian women, who did the unthinkable. You look at Liberia now it is impossible to not see that a vicious war has taken place. There's nowhere to hide. At the same time it is the first country in Africa that has a female president. How paradoxical, but it is not at all by accident. The lesson that Liberia teaches in that regard is very powerful. Some Liberian women, the 'Peace Women', stood up and navigated their country to peace and stability, at complete risk to their lives. Through courageous and selfless means they ended a senseless, vicious conflict. All the female leadership there today is the direct manifestation of how they brought consciousness and peace to their country.

The names of the characters in the play, Helena, Maima, Rita, Bessie, those are real names of women I met and got to know. I met Etweda Cooper, the head of the Liberian Women's Initiative, and another phenomenal Liberian woman.

Learning about her navigation through the war zone, her heroic work with many other women fighting for peace and 'genderizing' the treaty agendas, made some instantaneous alterations to my dramatic narrative. I was moved by her, inspired by her and changed by her, and we found an almost immediate powerful connection. We shared much common ground on our thoughts and hopes about the continent we both called home. It was after meeting her that the character of Rita was birthed. The complexities of all of these women, of their personalities, of their choices was something I had to fully embrace, no matter how uncomfortable at times, in order to give their humanity its fullest breadth.

This play is my humble attempt to give voice to women who navigate vicious terrains not of their making. To give their stories, their personhoods, their *Eclipsed* light a full though fleeting chance to shine.



## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

**DANAI GURIRA** co-created and performed in the award-winning, two-woman play *In the Continuum*, which premiered off-Broadway and toured the U.S. and Southern Africa. For her work on that production, Danai won a 2006 Obie Award, the 2006 Outer Critics John Gassner Award, and the 2004 Global Tolerance Award (Friends of the United Nations), in addition to being honored by the Theatre Hall of Fame. In 2007, she received a Helen Hayes Award for Best Lead Actress in *In the Continuum* at Woolly Mammoth. Danai was most recently seen in the acclaimed film *The Visitor* (with Oscar-nominated actor Richard Jenkins) and on Broadway in Lincoln Center Theater's production of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. She is the recipient of '08 TCG New Generations travel grant for *Eclipsed* and has taught playwriting and acting in Liberia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. She is developing a play about the current situation in Zimbabwe with the Royal Court in London and completing another Zimbabwean piece entitled *The Convert*. She received her MFA in acting from NYU. Danai was born in the U.S. to Zimbabwean parents and raised in Zimbabwe.

## LIBERIA: AN ABRIDGED TIMELINE

By Miriam Weisfeld, Dramaturg

**1824** Settlers from the American Colonization Society, intent on returning “Africans in America” to Africa, name their settlement on the West African coast “Monrovia” after American President Monroe. Monrovia will become the capital of Liberia, and the country will be divided for the next 180 years by bloody power struggles between the descendants of American settlers and the Gola, Krhan, Grebo, and other ethnic groups.

**1989 Samuel K. Doe**, of the Krhan ethnic group, who had seized power over Liberia in a military coup, sanctions genocide against rival ethnic groups. This prompts the United States to withdraw millions of dollars in assistance, causing further ethnic tension and the beginning of Liberia’s first civil war.



*Charles Taylor, former President of Liberia*

**1997 Charles Taylor**, a warlord born to a Gola mother and Americo-Liberian father and educated in the United States, becomes President of Liberia in a corrupt election that ushers in Liberia’s second civil war. The atrocities he commits during his rule include illegal weapon and diamond trading, the conscription of an army of child soldiers, and the rape, torture, and murder of thousands of civilians.

### April 2003 Women march

for peace. Over 1,000 women dressed in white stage peaceful assembly in Monrovia to advocate a cease-fire. In response to the catastrophic effects of war on Liberia’s family units, the **Liberian Women’s Initiative** began to form in 1994. Two civilian women, Etweda Cooper and Leyma Gbowee, initiated an unprecedented partnership between Christian and Muslim women in Liberia. They occupied outdoor markets, highways, and government buildings—marching, singing, fasting, making speeches, and ultimately shaming President



*Pewee Flomoku*

Charles Taylor and various warlords into gathering for peace talks. The LWI’s unwavering efforts over more than ten years have contributed to a ceasefire; a UN effort to disarm Liberia’s warring factions; and democratic elections in which a historic number of Liberian women registered and voted.

**June 2003 War comes to Monrovia.** Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (**LURD**), a rebel militia united only by the desire to remove Taylor from office, invade Monrovia. The rebels, who had controlled and terrorized Northwestern Liberia for several years, rape, mutilate, and murder hundreds of civilians in the nation’s capital. Under pressure from the Liberian Women’s Initiative and the international community, Charles Taylor meets with leaders of LURD and MODEL (Movement for Democracy in Liberia, rebels who had launched attacks from Cote d’Ivoire). They sign a **cease-fire treaty**, but it fails after Charles Taylor is indicted for war crimes by an International Criminal Court in Sierra Leone.

**August 2003 Taylor resigns.** With authorization from the UN Security Council, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) launches a peacekeeping mission to Liberia. Charles Taylor resigns and flees to Nigeria, and his government signs a comprehensive peace agreement with LURD and MODEL.

**2005 Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf**, a former Minister of Finance imprisoned twice under the Doe regime, wins a presidential election. The first woman elected head of state in all of Africa, Johnson-Sirleaf has established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for atrocities committed during Liberia’s civil wars, and helped develop Liberia’s food supply and economic infrastructure.



*Liberian President  
Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf*