

Sony's thriller "The Covenant," the highest-grossing film less than any weekend winner in the past three years. "The Covenant" rounded out the weak weekend's top three.



Entertainment



McCullum, center, says that "The Wire," reminds him of his life in Brooklyn.

stereotype-Free

don't want — hip-hop clichés.

"Hip-hop is so prevalent," Burns said. "Almost every kid read the part the same way, with the same gestures, the same [inflections]." Eventually, after throwing their net farther and wider, the pair found actors who didn't automatically slip into stereotypes to play urban black teens. These boys, ages 13 to 17, were the

ones who eventually won the new roles of eighth-graders in the watershed between innocence and hard reality in inner-city Baltimore.

Largely through the eyes of these youngsters, the creators explore the decay of the public education system in a big city like Baltimore to show where, what and how the children of the underclass really learn. In

the casting, Burns, a former policeman turned Baltimore school teacher, was trying, Simon said, to "recognize certain souls" to portray an abused child, a foster child, an outcast and a convict's son.

Although the actors had lived in big cities, none had any experience with the raw conditions of ghetto life portrayed on the show. To inhabit their characters, they had to look intently at lives lived in poverty, a dark world many adults would rather not consider.

Maestro Harrell, 15, who grew up on the South Side of Chicago and plays Randy, a foster child, called the experience an "eye opener." He said he wondered whether the houses in which they were shooting were sets until he was told people actually lived there.

"It really made me feel like I have to portray this character well because somebody out there is living this," he said.

Other aspects seemed familiar to Julito McCullum, who grew up in Brooklyn, N.Y. Students curse out teachers in Brooklyn just as they do in Baltimore, he said. Julito plays Namond, a smart but socially inept outcast who clings to the other street kids for protection. "He relies on these people to take care of him," he said.

Tristan Wilds, 17, plays Michael, the unspoken leader of the group.

"I give them backbone and they give me backbone," he said. "We all back each other up."

LYNN SMITH (LOS ANGELES TIMES)

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**Top
Stops**

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WASHINGTON REDSKINS

The Big Picture



After FedEx Field, the best place to watch the 'Skins

this season may be the Arlington Cinema 'N' Drafthouse, where

there's no cover, and every game will be projected on the (really) big screen. Tonight's contest against the Vikings presents a far better entertainment value than, say, "You, Me and Dupree."

→ Arlington Cinema 'N' Drafthouse, 2903 Columbia Pike, Arlington; 6:30 p.m., free; 703-486-2345, arlingtondrafthouse.com.



'THE BLUEST DAY'

Area Artist Reacts to 9/11

Deborah Coburn earned a B.A. in painting; decades later, profoundly touched by 9/11, she needed an outlet and returned to creative work in earnest. She'll discuss "The Bluest Day" from noon to 3 p.m.

→ Foundry Gallery, 1314 18th St. NW; through Oct. 1, free; 202-463-0203, foundry-gallery.org. (Dupont Circle)

LOUIS FISHER

On Presidential Power

Fisher, a specialist in constitutional law, discusses his new book, "In the Name of National Security," which contends that a 1953 Supreme Court decision gave the exec-

's Appealing New Leaf

is largely a slog through sappy balladry and by-the-numbers dance pop. With edgy sonic manipulators such as Swizz Beats and Pharrell aboard on "B'Day," Beyoncé heads more challenging terrain.

The backing track for the seduc-



penthouse pop, "Kitty Kat."

While her debut seemed too eager to please, these songs connect the Houston native with deep, vital roots. The playful chant of "Get Me Bodied" suggests both a children's street game and a traditional work