



Clear Cut

AWARD-WINNING SOUTH AFRICAN FILMMAKER ZWELETHU RADEBE DRAWS ON HIS OWN PAST TO CREATE POWERFUL NARRATIVES - NARRATIVES THAT HAVE TAKEN HIS VISION ALL THE WAY TO LOS ANGELES.

BY DEBBIE HATHWAY

IF EVER THERE WAS one man to watch in South African filmmaking, it's Zwelethu Radebe. At 28 years old, he has won a slew of awards since the Student Silver at his first Loeries for Ster-Kinekor's *Thato*. The trend is now ongoing with the release of 2017's *The Hangman*.

The short film explores what domestic life was like for people during the apartheid era – what it was like to live, fall in love, read a book or tell a joke against the backdrop of events such as the Sharpeville massacre and the campaign to free Nelson Mandela. The plot centres on the harrowing story of Khetha (Thato 'DH' Dhladla), a black prison warden guarding black inmates in Pretoria Central Prison's gallows – one of whom turns out to be his estranged father (Khulu

Skenjana). 'Black fathers in South Africa are perceived today more as villains than heroes. A lot of these fathers go away without explanation, leaving their children to create images of them and what they think the truth is... That's why I told the story about a father found in prison, who wasn't there for his child,' explains Zwelethu.

His own father, Nhlanhla, was murdered when he was just 14 years old, leaving his wife, another son and two daughters behind. 'Even though my father didn't run away, he was absent,' he says.

Is Zwelethu's work biographical? Not consciously but he acknowledges that it can reflect certain influences. 'A lot of it explores real-life situations and the consequences of our actions.' Memories of Nhlanhla's related experiences during armed robberies at the filling station and garage shop that he owned in Soweto, where Zwelethu grew up, were clearly embedded in his subconscious and reflected in his student film *Isazela*, which followed a similar plot.

A screenwriter by training, Zwelethu nevertheless spent much of his youth behind the lens of an 8mm camcorder, and in front of the camera as a child actor. Ironically, his mother has shared stories of Nhlanhla's involvement in scriptwriting when they first met while she was working as a nurse at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital. 'My father used to write scripts and stage plays that were performed in the Nursing College auditorium but this was something he never pursued. I think he either acted in or directed some of the plays,' says Zwelethu. 'He never knew me to be even thinking about becoming a filmmaker.'

At school, Zwelethu excelled at athletics and soccer (another talent he inherited from his father) and at one stage considered making a career out of sport. Meanwhile, Nhlanhla had ensured his son attended good schools, knowing he needed a strong foundation to set him up for whatever path he later chose. 'My relationship with my father was very good. He was always there for me,' says Zwelethu, who remembers him being very strict ('old-school,' he says), preventing his children from watching television for fear that it would have the wrong influence. 'As soon as something was broadcast that he thought offensive or explicit, he would

While award-winning film director Zwelethu Radebe's work is not necessarily biographical, he admits that the past does end up being reflected in the tales he tells.

change the channel. I used to watch movies in secret. That's how I became interested in film. The more you're told not to do something, the more you want to do it.'

He says he grew up watching quite serious movies. 'I used to enjoy blockbusters, movies about people dealing with life situations that were maybe traumatic. That was me trying to cope with losing my father. It made me comfortable knowing that there were other people out there who'd had bad things happen to them.'

A quintessential storyteller, Zwelethu is able to apply his substantial skills in the commercial realm too. He has spent the last three years directing commercials for local and international agencies and clients, and shooting them across Africa and Europe. He joined production company Egg Films as a commercials director last year. *The Butterfly Effect*, which he directed as part of M&C Saatchi Abel's South African launch campaign for Strongbow, won a silver APEX award in 2017 for creative effectiveness. The campaign was

reportedly the most successful launch globally for Heineken in 2016. And it's not surprising. Zwelethu's commercials are literally film shorts – complete stories that hold your attention from start to finish, often inspiring an emotional reaction.

As for his visual style, photography is a strong reference point and Zwelethu looked to the work of Santu Mofokeng, Ernest Cole, Paul Weinberg, Alf Khumalo and Fanie Jason to capture that apartheid-era reality for *The Hangman*. Kgomotso 'Neto' Tleane was the photographer on set who influenced the visual look of the film that some are calling 'elegance in cinematography' – when Zwelethu saw his images, he immediately sent them to his colourist so that he could begin prepping. 'That was the beginning of "the look".'

Filming *The Hangman* at Constitution Hill's Old Fort in Pretoria helped the film spiritually, says Zwelethu. 'A lot of atrocities happened there. You can feel what's happened in that place when you're in it,' he explains. And he visited the gallows at Pretoria Central Prison. 'I couldn't have made the



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Zwelethu is in his best space when making a film he has written and directed. It has a dual effect: nervousness at producing something of value to the high standard he sets himself and whether what he sees in his mind's eye can be adequately translated into what a camera records. Even when making a commercial, he brings a filmic quality to his work.

film without going in. You can feel the heaviness... the multitude of people who lost their lives there. You can see the seven ropes hanging... stand on the platform where they collapse. See the people in the photographs who look the same age as me – or younger. It's chilling. I felt sick.'

What drives him? 'I guess I have an ultimate dream – a goal – and a purpose for my life that I need to fulfil. That's why I do what I do. I believe God has given each of us a specific talent, which is linked to our destiny, and our destiny is our purpose that we have to fulfil.'

Zwelethu gets the most gratification from making films, which he sees as specific assignments that convey a message to people. 'I feel more in my element when I'm making a movie I've written and directed. I do get nervous but it's like adrenaline: when I'm not nervous, I know I'm not going to do well in whatever I'm doing.'

These projects come with challenges, and sometimes require compromise, but Zwelethu says his biggest fear is not being able to translate what he sees in his mind's eye to camera. And then there's the language – he thinks in English but when it comes to dialogue, he often enlists his mother's help to craft the same gravitas in that language as their native Zulu is able to produce. 'The Zulu language is more



inside story

poetic than English, so we have to manipulate English to make it sound as powerful as Zulu would. That's sometimes difficult in dialogue.'

In terms of his team, he chooses to work with people with whom he has a relationship. 'Staffing up commercial jobs is influenced by their availability, so sometimes you don't get to work with your first choice. But for me, it's not always about working with the most talented, it's about the relationship I have with a person, how good they are at their craft and having a craft that speaks to the voice that I have. Then we can work and we can collaborate.'

Collaboration, he explains, is a strength for any artist. 'We don't make art for ourselves, we make it for our audiences.'

I pay attention and listen to other points of view and don't take things personally if my idea is not necessarily the same as theirs. That's something that I've learnt.' Therein lies a leadership style that naturally inspires loyalty and dedication.

Zwelethu is also not a fan of all-nighters. He'd rather wake up and start working early to ensure that he has quality time with those close to him. Exercise is no longer part of his destressing regime but laughter is – and lots of tea. 'When people go outside to smoke, I join them with a cup of tea and two brown sugars. That's my way of relaxing.'

What's next? *The Hangman* is being made into a feature-length film thanks to Zwelethu's synergistic introduction to a Los Angeles production company that is keen to help African filmmakers realise their dreams. He is currently developing the script with them. 'Now I get to answer a lot of people's questions, but in a very different way to what they will expect. It's not just a longer version of the short film; it's a different story altogether. It really explores what it's like for a boy to grow up with an absent father. It's a global issue, which is why it will make a great film.'

The original, which the AFDA Film School alumnus both wrote and directed, has scooped 10 awards to date, including Best Short Film and a Sembene Ousmane Award for Excellence in Filmmaking and African Storytelling at the Zanzibar International Film Festival and Best South African Short Film at the Durban International Film Festival. It also won at the Shnit Worldwide Short Film Festival, the Best of International Short Films Festival and the Discover Film Festival.

As for the future of South African filmmaking, Zwelethu believes we need more locals to tell their stories rather than making adaptations of South African or African stories designed to appeal to a foreign market. 'We're taught in film schools about American or European filmmaking but we're taking Western and European conventions and trying to adapt them to the African environment and then we wonder why the story isn't impactful. Let's just be South African and tell South African stories.' ▽



A screenwriter by training, Zwelethu spent time behind the lens of an 8mm camcorder as a child, honing what would be his eye as a future director.