

# Triomf – an African tale

By Karen van Schalkwyk

South African history is dynamic and dramatic, as the past affected all of us in different ways. Mostly, in contemporary South Africa, this examination of the past has been from a one-dimensional look at what apartheid and freedom meant for black South Africans. A film by Michael Raeburn, which is currently in production, looks at the past from a poor white Afrikaner perspective.

*Triomf* is set just before the first democratic elections in 1994 and tells the tale of a dysfunctional Afrikaans family trying to come to terms with what this change will mean for their lives.

Raeburn explains that the film is partially about family dysfunction, "but it is also allegorical. It is about the end of an old regime and the beginning of a new world. The family is the canvas and the story takes place on the face of this background."

Raeburn adds that he fell in love with the book and material when he first read it. "This was six years ago, but it resonated with me in terms of a Tennessee Williams or a Sam Shepard play. The characters are on the edge – poor, dysfunctional and steeped in a kind of tragic humour. This kind of material is great for drama and is universal in its meaning."

The film was almost impossible to finance. Raeburn explains what he believes is the reason for this: "The material is simply not politically correct. In the West, the idea of a subject that deals with poor whites in South Africa is considered a joke in bad taste. The film is politically incorrect in South Africa because the majority of people think that a low class Afrikaner family, representative of a power force that took three centuries to dislodge, is of no interest at all and best forgotten."



POOR WHITE PERSPECTIVE – Director Michael Raeburn

"In fact, I don't see this as my subject at all. What will make the film work is extreme characters in extreme circumstances, on the edge of despair and insanity, who are vulnerable, awful, funny, loving, and hateful – a rich bundle of human emotions, and all set in a 'never-been-seen-before' milieu."

Raeburn adds that he has never faced such a challenge in getting money for a film. "It took over six years to get here. A few French funds for African filmmakers saved the day, and a private Zimbabwean investor was a miraculous godsend. The list of people who turned the film down in Europe and South Africa is very long. One of the biggest challenges has been the planning and preparation to ensure we can make a good film with only R1.7m."

Raeburn, who has always made politically challenging films like the Zimbabwean film, *It*, explains why he is attracted to these stories. "Any subject that involves strong issues is inevitably going to be dramatic. If you took *Triomf* and set it in Tennessee, you would lose the extremely powerful element of a general election that for the first time in the

history of South Africa is going to be based on universal suffrage, and bring an end to one power while giving birth to another."

The film is shot in Afrikaans and Raeburn says that even though language holds authenticity, "I am not setting out to put over a culture. Culture or politics should be a canvas upon which a story is painted. But as I have no stars and no producers telling me what to do, I can do *Triomf* for real, with real South African actors speaking their language."

Raeburn elaborates: "Only sometimes do great actors pull off the assimilation. Brando did it as a true Brit in *Quentinada*, and Forrest Whitaker as Idi Amin and [Meryl] Streep does it often. If such actors bring in the millions you are truly fortunate. I went this route three years ago and got Tim Roth, Jessica Lange and others attached for a while, but the distribution agents wanted even bigger names. That is when I decided to do the film in Afrikaans."

Raeburn explains how he got the cast and crew together: "Moonyen Lee cast the film. We had some lucky finds. As for the crew,



Lead actor Lionel Newton



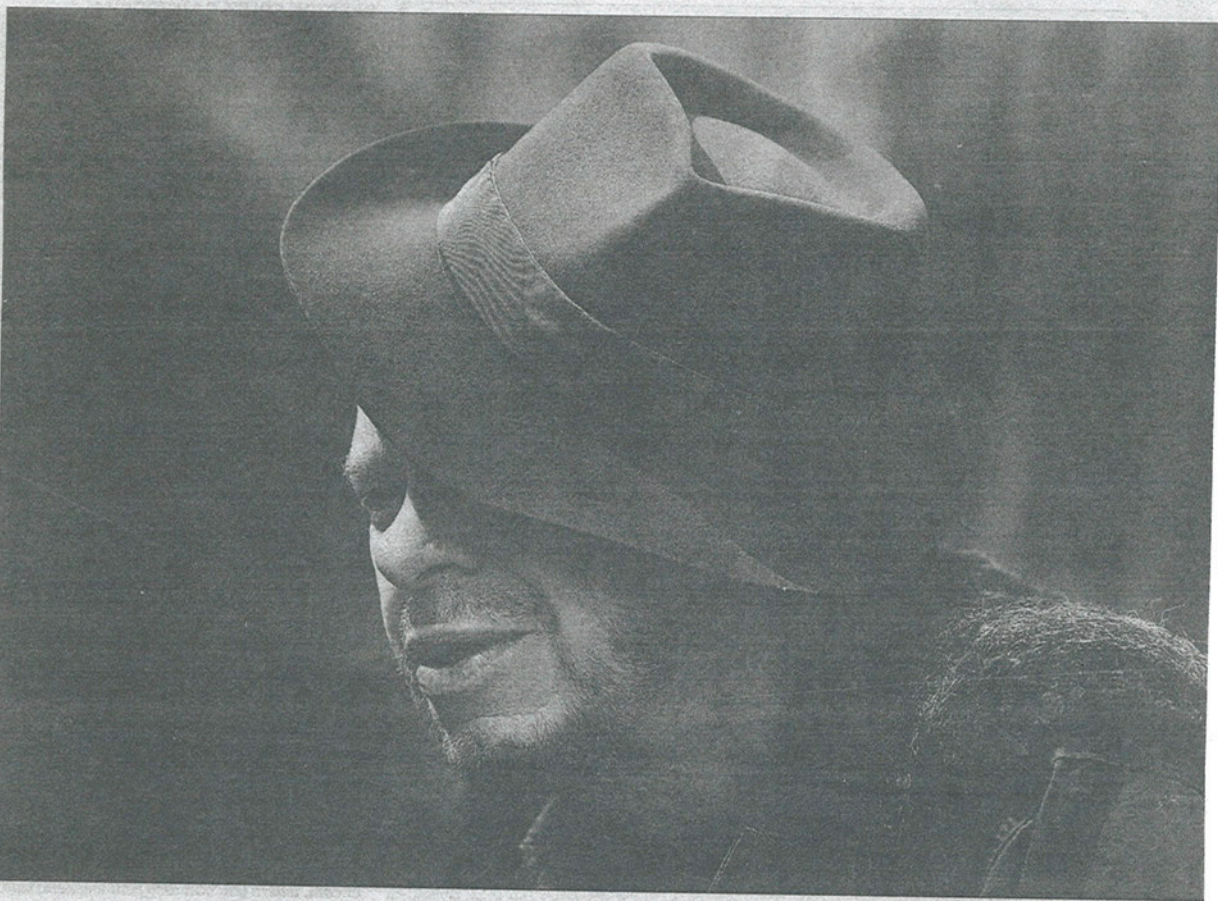
Triomf extras

due to the small budget, it was a case of giving people a break to move up a notch or finding people who loved the script. Natalie Stange, our South African producer, has been great and the DOP is Jamie Ramsay with art director Tiaan van Tonder. We are also shooting in a great location in a house in Jan Hofmeyr Park, Brixton. The music is very important and is being composed by Philip Miller. The film is being shot on two Panasonic P2 cameras."

The film will be distributed at all major international film festivals. Raeburn concludes: "I hope that this film inspires people to see other sides. I believe it is a strong story about the human condition set in a very specific time and landscape." 📺

# Filmmaker burns bright

Raeburn has default personality trait — he is nothing if not tenacious, writes **Aspasia Karras**



IT'S raining like it's monsoon season in Bombay the night I meet Michael Raeburn. It's Sunday and he is on the phone to a French post production house in another room of the small house in Westdene where he is holed for the filming of *Triomf*, based on Marlene Van Niekerk's prize-winning novel about a dysfunctional poor white family on the eve of the 1994 elections.

Each room hums with the mysterious activities performed by the myriad people that populate the final credits of any film. It's a labour-intensive industry even on a

Sunday night.

"Just don't call me a British filmmaker," he says when he emerges. "I am from Zimbabwe." That fact alone could fill up several columns of this article, suffice it to say that he is less upbeat about his homeland than he was in 1993 when he made *Jit* a comedy that captured his hopes for the future of the country from which he had been expelled by Ian Smith for his hard-hitting film *Rhodesia Countdown*.

Thirty years later he made *Zimbabwe Countdown* questioning Robert Mugabe's betrayal of the

liberation war and documenting his own dismay at the unravelling state of his nation. "It's a catastrophe," he says with an air of finality, as he settles down on the couch to chat with me.

Another potential catastrophe is the inclement weather that has been delaying filming. It seems that being an independent filmmaker is a precarious balancing act between finding funding and maintaining your creative vision.


Delays are untenable for the filmmaker whose struggle to make *Triomf* has taken him to every possible funding source only to be

rejected, partly because he refused to compromise the story and set it in another context.

The fact that he is now shooting the film seven years after he bought the rights is testament to his default personality trait — he is nothing if not tenacious.

It is the strength of the story that gave him the energy to pursue what must at times have seemed a Sisyphean task. "*Triomf* has a universal quality, poverty is dramatic. The context is a metaphor, it's the end of one world and the beginning of another.

"The pressure of six days to elec-



**STRAIGHT TALKER:**  
Filmmaker Michael  
Raeburn struggled to  
get funding for  
'Triomf' because he  
refused to  
compromise the  
story

Picture: ALON SKUY

tions trips this guy's mind, it's just too much."

As to what drives this filmmaker a story he relates about a Hollywood agent is telling. He had just filmed the highly acclaimed *The Grass is Singing* based on Doris Lessing's novel, and was being feted by a Hollywood agent. "He was appalled that I might want to read the script of a film he was offering me... that interview with the agent is what drove me out. You have to know what you are making films for, and what kinds of films you are making, you really end up making what you know."

# TRIUMPHANTLY DISILLUSIONED

BY JANET SMITH

The Ford Granada's sunroof is Sellotaped shut. All around is the layered gloom of dirt. There's the infamous mass art shame on the wall, the lonely rose and the glass of water. The screen of the Trinitron TV set is smashed in, but it's still there, on its dolly - as always, the focal point in the lounge.

There are too many yellow porcelain dogs to count, too many that are broken. And too many goblins and elves, dwarves and pixies in the scrapheap of a postage stamp-sized garden. Most are damaged, kicked in, leaning to the left with smashed faces.

You'd be impressed by the art and props departments' tenacity in sourcing all these accoutrements of poor white living. But there'd be no more.

Very little was Productions in the hood of Jan Hofmann shoot. Although its tively banished to Klerksdorp for a hot took place, the house apparently remains unchanged.

Jan Hohnmeyr has, cious before - and in city" dream conjured when whites who were or, quite simply, very p access a decent roof ove It's where the classic *Elke Man*, which turned into a major star, was fil *omy*, the award-winning n with white desolation and of racism.

The movie, which is dr multi-award-winning book an Niekerk, is directed by ased filmmaker Michae those previous films incl

## TONIGHT



### VANESSA COOKE

"There's an innocence. She loves her dogs and her flowers. But she is very vulnerable. There's a complete trust there that makes her life all the more horrible."

Vanessa Cooke is talking about her character, Mol - one of South African literature's most evocative, disturbing and tragic figures, brought to life through the artistry of writer van Niekerk.

Cooke said she started out with the idea that the film would be in English and, upon discovering it was in Afrikaans, she wondered if she would be retained. Raeburn wanted no-one else for the role, which requires emotional remoteness and emotional depth in equal measure.



Cooke's performance is so perfectly contextualised within white poverty that it was inevitable that she was reminded of another role she loved doing: Sissie in Athol Fugard's *People Are Living There*.

"The issue of poor whites is not dealt with quite enough in the arts," she says, "so even that play was quite unusual in that respect."

"But I have thought about it a lot, and about how we dealt with some of the horrible issues at that time." Undoubtedly, the most wearying aspect of Mol's life is dealing with Treppie, her brother, and Lambert, her son. The conflictual and incestuous relationships between the four main characters - this includes her "relative", Pop - certainly dishearten and help to destroy her, with the men's own intense lack of meaning in their lives making hers all the more difficult.

Fortunately, there are the dogs, and Cooke has grown close to "actor" Cindy, a *brak* who plays the adored Gerty in the film. She and Cindy are seldom apart and she admits that it is going to be tough for both of them when they have to part at the end of the shoot. The pair have had to "talk" to each other a lot, as the script dictates.

"You think I'm talking a lot of rubbish, hey Gerty?" says Mol in the book. And so it is. A lot of rubbish, a lot of love. Perhaps the only real love? Cooke, who has been one of South Africa's most important theatremakers through apartheid and reconciliation, has taken a break from her directorship at the Market Laboratory to film *Triomf*.

out shooting dates and what

is were with me. excited when I got a part in a big dinner for me and we this is something. I'm 23 - a movie that is going to be s why I'm sure about that at us. Are you hungry? Do ything we can get you?" ty has worn her hair in d for this role, she has to platinum. It's almost as z doll to help her design

change, stepping out of nto another to mix it up. dangerous fall through a symbolic, in spite of the

right arm and others on her wrist. She considers it a sign.

"This movie is giving me a different perspective. I mean, this character is a high-class prostitute, she's quite expensive. She's seen a lot, and maybe her heart is a bit rough, but I love her so much. She's got depth. She's not just this uh-huh-huh kinda person. She's come out of tough circumstances. I admire that."

Director Michael Raeburn fell for her - apparently after seeing her on TV when he had already auditioned other, perhaps bigger, stars like Kim Engelbrecht for the role of the hooker, Mary.

"I can't explain it really," says Andrews with a grin, "because the director just seemed to believe I was right for the part. Almost from the get-

being shot in their neighbourhood. The movie *Triomf*'s PICTURES: EUGENE ARRES

## LIONEL NEWTON

Walking scar tissue. That's actor Lionel Newton's description for Treppie, his character drawn from Marlene van Niekerk's true fable. A life as inauspicious as porcelain ornaments crammed into a display cabinet, Treppie's existence means nothing.

He is a poor white male in a culturally layered society which he knows has no time for his degradation, no respect. So he is lost. He feels derided, locked inside poverty, confused by hate and fear.

"He's in a Beckettian dilemma," says Newton.  
"He's trapped in the madness of his

dysfunctional family, yet he's experiencing a deep solitude about being outside it. He's in a very lonely place, a painful place. This is a different psyche to the one that many of us understand."

But Newton, for all his clever sophistication as an award-winning stage actor, does understand at least aspects of it. At least a little better, perhaps, than the average white middle-class man.

"The polytones of that experience are not new to me. My mom is Afrikaans and my *ouma* and *oupa* are pure Afrikaans. My *oupa* was a mineworker, and we were very broke when I was a child. That resonates with me. Then, when I refused the military – I even changed my name as an actor to Li



Newman – my Afrikaans family ostracised me. My cousin Andre, who'd been fighting on the border, said to me: '*Eke gaan jou doodskiel!*'"

My dad is Cockney, so I wasn't close to that side either, so eventually I really found a family in the theatre. That was a revolution for me. But there was a moment when that working-class Afrikaner part of my family who were ashamed of me finally acknowledged what I had done as an actor.

"At the table one day, there was this ding-ding on the side of the glass and an announcement was made, and I think there was an apology in there for what had been done."

Concern about the temptation to

caricature is high on set, so Newton's Treppie will remain the way Van Niekerk dreamed him up.

"They knew *\*\*\*\*-all* about *\*\*\*\*-all*, but they wanted to come and tell us about the finer things," the character says in the book, in response to a visit to his home by two smarmy members of the National Party, looking for donations.

"Us with our grandfather who lost his hand in the depression, and our mother who coughed herself to death, from TB. And our father who hanged himself by the neck in a Railways truck. They knew nothing at all about the meaning of misery."

Fortunately, it is the meaning of misery to which Newton has often been attracted in

his career, and the kind of misery that can trickle over into comedy has also featured in his repertoire.

Newton admits he has a tendency to fixate on Samuel Beckett, whose philosophies about poverty of all kinds and the relationships we have with death and disorder fascinate him.

So he feels close enough to Treppie, who occasionally wails Jim Reeves songs and drinks too much. As Van Niekerk describes in the book: "Treppie has the character. He just lacks the will."

■ Newton's improvisational TV comedy series, *Sorted*, has been nominated for an international Emmy Award.