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'Armblikes' story could go world-wide

Written by Elizma Nolte
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Is the shocking and disturbing story of a poor, dysfunctional Afrikaans family really one we want to tell the rest of the world? We speak to British filmmaker Michael Raeburn, who starts shooting Triomf in September. A British filmmaker is about to create the first Afrikaans film for the international market – with a storyline that is bound to capture attention abroad and raise a few eyebrows at home.

Michael Raeburn will start shooting Triomf, an adaptation of Marlene van Niekerk's controversial book, in South Africa in September.

With the words "here is your next film", someone had dumped a copy of the novel, which has been translated into English and widely lauded, on Raeburn's desk.

"I was totally captivated by the characters and this world on the edge they inhabited," he says.

"It reminded me of the worlds created by [American playwrights] Sam Shepard or Tennessee Williams."

Triomf is set in the Johannesburg suburb of the same name – a previously bulldozed township inhabited by poor white Afrikaners – in the years leading up to the 1994 elections. It follows the story of a dysfunctional family of "armblanks", as they would have been labelled in the old South Africa.

The more politically correct term would be "trailer trash", says Raeburn and as such he believes it tells an international story. I cringe as I recall the mixed feelings of shock and disgust, sadness and sympathy the uncomfortable reality portrayed in Triomf had evoked on my first reading of Van Niekerk's book.

Is this really an image of South Africa we want to show the world? The Benade family – Pop, Mol, Lambert, and Treppie – are very extreme people, Raeburn admits.

Mol has an incestuous relationship with her son Lambert, who in turn is slightly retarded and prone to fits, while the violent Treppie is driven by demons.

"They all drink like hell," adds Raeburn, "but in the end it's just a family – you will be attached to some characters and afraid of others. It's also a very funny story in a dark way.

"In that sense it could take place anywhere in the world. "If such a film was set in America, no one would say it was letting down the country."

At the same time, he says, the story is absolutely peculiar to South Africa. Although the book spans a longer period, the film is set in the five days leading up to South Africa's first democratic elections. "It does have the quality of a fable – the death of the old and the birth of the new; an awaited utopia, or armageddon for some..." The project started out with a million-euro budget and interest from actors such as Emma Thompson and Richard E Grant, but Raeburn has since decided to take a more realistic view, scale the budget down and go the local "art movie" route.

"I'm doing it as an authentic, artistic South African piece." Yet, financial backing from South Africa has been scant. For starters, there is the



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controversial topic of the film. Then there is the fact that it is shot in Afrikaans. Add to this the fact that it has no big-named actors and becomes far too risky a project for local producers to take on.

So Raeburn has turned to the international market for his funding. A grant from the French government has given the project a lifeline, but he hopes that there will be other private investors interested in participating.

"I am looking for anybody who might be interested in becoming co-producer for a small amount of money.

"It may be someone who wants to act in the film, or simply someone who wants to support an artistic endeavour or invest in a profitable production."

Raeburn grew up in Zimbabwe and is currently based between Paris and South Africa.

His previous work as a filmmaker includes an adaptation of Doris Lessing's novel *The Grass is Singing* (1981), with Karen Black, John Thaw and John Kani, and the charming 1990 film *Jit*, the first indigenous Zimbabwean feature.

Raeburn also made the documentaries *Rhodesia Countdown* (1969) – which saw him "thrown out" of then Rhodesia – and *Zimbabwe Countdown* (2003), which has in turn led to a ban on him returning to the country. He has recently written his second novel, *Night of the Fireflies*, a thriller set in Mozambique.

His biggest problem with raising finance internationally is that many find the world of *Triomf* "totally implausible".

"They can't imagine that a place like that existed," he says. To help them visualise it, Raeburn has shot a trailer in the working class district of Jan Hofmeyr (*Triomf*, today, is a middle class suburb), which can be viewed on YouTube.

Follow the making of *Triomf* at triomfmovie.blog.spot.com or if you would like to get involved, call Micahel Raeburn on +27 82 219 7133 or email mraeburn@compuserve.com

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