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Film of major SA novel a triumph

By Wilhelm Snyman

Triomf. Directed by Michael Raeburn, with Lionel Newton, Vanessa Cooke, Obed Balovi, Pual Luckhoff, Eduan van Jaarsveldt and Pam Andrews. Based on the novel by Marlene van Niekerk. At the Labia.

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Review: Wilhelm Snyman

Harrowing in its honesty and depravity, Triomf is, like South Africa, a challenge to one's sense of sanity and order.

The acclaimed novel by Marlene van Niekerk explores the reality of a poor white family living in that part of Johannesburg which used to be known as Sophiatown, the vibrant heart of a multi-racial Johannesburg until it was bulldozed during the height of apartheid by the government.

The community was destroyed and shipped out to God knows where, and with the usual apartheid-era sensitivity, was renamed and rebuilt as Triomf, a suburb destined to be inhabited by the city's poor whites, those whom apartheid sought to benefit.

The film, like the novel is set in April 1994, just before the new order takes over, what literary critics would call the "meta-narrative" is the prevailing political dynamic unfolding at the time.

This is then contrasted with the interior narrative of what goes on in the Benade "family" made up of Mol (Vanessa Cooke), Treppies (Lionel Newton) Pop (Paul Luckhoff) and Lambert (Eduan van Jaarsveldt).

These supposed beneficiaries have done anything but triumph, as their place of abode would seem to indicate. Being the beneficiaries of a system that is itself distorted inevitably leads to a distortion within the psyche of the family, who serve as exemplars for the wider abuse inherent in the apartheid system. Can the individual living in a situation of legislated privilege emerge as vaguely sane?

Imagine the effect on those who are the victims of the system? And aren't the

Benades in a sense also victims because they've not had to compete on an equal footing in society at large?

What was designed to protect them in effect enfeebled them. And that is not to say that the Benade family even make use of their privilege - they were victims long before apartheid came into being, they serve as a symptom for a more profound and widespread disease. This disease is then enacted by the various members of the family in their relationship with the other people living in Triomf and with each other.

While debates may rage about how the film version of a novel may differ from the author's intention, the point is that a major South African novel has been filmed, something that does not happen all that often. And hence one welcomes it. Reminiscent of the New Zealand film, *Once Were Warriors*, Triomf on another level is simply a film about class, those who are the victims of any societal arrangement, those who cannot cope and turn inwards, into an unwittingly self-destructive psychosis. That said, the narrative relies on the hidden truth of their situation gradually emerging, being peeled away, layer by layer, as one incident after another reveals and alludes to a hidden truth.

There is no plot as such, but rather the film takes the form of a case study, a nigh voyeuristic adventure into the lives of other people.

The pace is gradual and the success of this approach relies on casting and this is where the real "triumph" of the film lies. There are moments when one might feel that the film errs on the side of parodying the hapless individuals portrayed.

One might feel that "surely people cannot be that bizarre", but as the film unfolds it becomes clear how damaged they are and that there is an internal logic in their behaviour, which ranges from the absurd, insane frustration to glimpses of doomed happiness. Barriers of race seem to drift away as both black and white find themselves at the bottom rung of the social ladder and have much in common as they virtually scavenge to make a living, although Lambert and Treppies are not without skills.

Vanessa Cooke gives an excellent performance as the "mother", living in a world of her own, a shattered individual who has long ago given up making sense of the world, if she had ever tried.

Pop is the proverbial bum, sits around, drinking and smoking as he sees the new political order unfolding on TV. The real victim of this family is Lambert, where Van Jaarsveldt's performance is brilliant, along with that of Lionel Newton who as Treppies is the only figure with any authority because he is the only one who brings in some money into the household. Pam Andrews too has a difficult and demanding role as Lambert's "birthday present".

The Benade family have too many demons of their own to be too concerned with the political changes around them - they will continue to be victims of themselves. Only now with the new order emerging they might have someone else to blame, but their malady was there long before 1994. The malady lies in the very nature of South African society. Obligatory viewing.

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