

## 'Snot en trane'

**JEREMY KUPER - Feb 20 2009 06:00**

Lionel Newton, who plays Treppie in the much-anticipated screen adaptation of *Triomf*, speaks to Jeremy Kuper about the frustration and rage he tapped into to bring Marlene van Niekerk's character to life. Based on the book by Marlene van Niekerk, *Triomf* is the first Afrikaans movie to get international distribution. Shocking and darkly funny at the same time, the film is set in 1994, six days before the first free elections. It not only looks back into the recent history of the country, but also into the dark past of the Benades, a poor Afrikaans family eking out a life in the Jo'burg suburb of Triomf. Be prepared to be surprised. *Triomf* was built on the ruins of Sophiatown, and this has not been conveniently forgotten by everyone. The Benades' plot is on the land that was taken from the family of a black chap called Sonny (played by Obed Baloyi). He waits outside in the street for the day of the election -- when he will get it back and the Boers will run for the border.

Director Michael Raeburn, who shot the film with digital cameras, likens it to a Greek tragedy, but this is a peculiarly Afrikaans film. The dysfunctional family relationship and pressure-cooker atmosphere in the house is heightened by the severe problems of the 21-year-old Lambert (Eduan van Jaarsveldt). His mother and father, Pop and Mol (Paul Lückhoff and Vanessa Cooke), avoid confronting him, whereas Treppie's love-hate relationship with Lambert, around which the film revolves, sets off a chain of events that cannot be controlled. I catch up with Lionel Newton, who plays Treppie, on a cold, grey and desolate English Saturday in Stratford-upon-Avon. He is here performing at the RSC in *The Tempest*, set in Africa, with Sir Antony Sher and John Kani. Newton describes Treppie as "a walking scar tissue. The life he is living is as a result of something that went wrong many years ago." Playing him "was frightening. I think". Still, he was so "knocked out" by the book that when he heard they were making a film about it he was desperate to play the part. "My mum is Afrikaans and comes from a working-class background, so in one way I could relate to a lot of what was going on in the story," says Newton. A true method actor, Newton stopped washing and brushing his teeth for three weeks before the start of filming. He went to live in the house where the film was going to be made on his own. "I

immersed myself in that environment. I went to people's houses and I spoke, not quite in character, but certainly not as myself." The production was delayed for 18 months because of lack of funding -- and when the filming did eventually start, things went wrong. In the first week the weather was so bad they couldn't shoot at all and later one week's worth of sound recordings were stolen. "I was so angry," Newton says about the theft, "because you just can't re-create that kind of thing in a studio." With a small budget, this increased the pressure to perform. He explains how his frustration with the production setbacks and the claustrophobic environment of living in a very small house, crammed full of equipment, helped him deliver the nuances of the complex character of Treppie. "Once I got stuck into that tar, that mud of what the place was made up of, I really just wallowed in it," he says. Newton compares making a film with Raeburn to "the 24 hours just before your wife's going to give birth for the first time -- anything can happen and you're in red-alert zone. It's a kind of adrenalised environment. It's what makes filmmaking exciting, I suppose." Pausing to reflect for a moment, he confirms what he believes. "In some ways it is. In some ways it's incredibly frustrating, because Treppie's quite stubborn." Transforming his own character to play down-at-heel Treppie left Newton feeling an incredible inner rage. "The strange thing was, when we stopped filming, I couldn't get rid of that." This rage that came from what he calls "the psychological space I had to get in to play it. [I was] angry about things that happened to me ... there's part of you that doesn't really want to be that," he says. Maybe not everybody will be ready for the high drama of *Triomf*, and Raeburn thinks that Afrikaans art-house might not be the best label for it. But with performances as intense as these, this powerful picture must surely be seen as a triumph for Suid-Afrikaanse filmmaking.

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