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April 20 2007

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## Michael Raeburn: adapting change

**Shaun de Waal** speaks to British filmmaker Michael Raeburn about his film *Triomf*



Michael Raeburn

**A**t a recent panel on scriptwriting and the development of cinema in South Africa, a member of the audience asked how a “British” filmmaker could make a film in Afrikaans, from an Afrikaans novel. The filmmaker in question is director Michael Raeburn, and the film is *Triomf*, based on Marlene van Niekerk’s much garlanded novel -- which has also been translated into English.

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Meeting Raeburn (in South Africa to promote his novel *The Night of the Fireflies*) a short time later, I told him what had been said at the scriptwriting panel. On the subject of his “Britishness”, he laughed: “I was born in Egypt -- I’m Jewish, Arabic and Scottish, so I’m a kind of a ‘coloured’. I have one foot in Europe and one foot in Africa, so the thing is to be a kind of a bridge.”

And Raeburn’s work as a filmmaker has bridged such gaps, from his adaptation of Doris Lessing’s novel *The Grass is Singing* (1981), with Karen Black, John Thaw and John Kani, to his charming 1990 film *Jit*, the first indigenous Zimbabwean feature, and one that celebrated a decade of independence in that country -- it is filled with optimism as its protagonist overcomes a multitude of obstacles with an unflinching good humour.

Raeburn also made the documentaries *Rhodesia Countdown* (1969) and *Zimbabwe*

*Countdown* (2003) -- both, in their different ways and at different times, focusing on the turmoil in that country. Robert Mugabe, once Raeburn and Zimbabwe's hero, has become by the second documentary the tyrant we see today. *Zimbabwe Countdown* was to be shown by the SABC, but has been endlessly delayed for reasons never adequately explained to Raeburn. He was "thrown out" of the then Rhodesia by Ian Smith, and cannot return today because of his objections to the Mugabe regime.

In the meantime, between such filmmaking projects, Raeburn wrote *Night of the Fireflies* (David Philip), a sort of metaphysical thriller set in Mozambique. It is Raeburn's second novel, after the book of *Jit*, and a collection of stories. "I write books," he says, "because it takes so long to get money to make a film."

When it comes to making a movie of *Triomf*, and his qualifications for the job, he says, "I've written the script. I know the dialogue by heart. I understand Afrikaans -- I grew up in Zimbabwe. I've been workshopping the script with the actors, and I've been working on it with numerous people such as William Pretorius and André Stolz. I have a continuity person who speaks Afrikaans."

The novel, and the adaptation, are already in a mixture of English, Afrikaans and Zulu, much of it slangy, and Raeburn's version will enhance that multilingual mix. He wants especially to keep the Afrikaans aspect, though, because "Afrikaans has a great dramatic power" and "it suits the subject matter".

A promo for *Triomf* has already been shot, and Raeburn plans to start shooting the film itself around the middle of this year, as further finance becomes available. Much of the budget is already in place, and Raeburn and his crew will shoot on digital, making the whole process cheaper and enabling a much quicker shoot. That, though, also means that "we have to be super prepared" before shooting starts, hence all the workshopping and rehearsal.

Emma Thompson, Alan Rickman, Tim Roth and Richard E Grant were among those interested in taking part in *Triomf*, but the projected budget of €6,5-million proved impossible to raise even with such names.

(It is now down to about a 10th of that.) “I thought it would be a piece of cake with those names,” says Raeburn, “but no. I was told, ‘Come back with Nicole Kidman and we’ll talk.’”

Comparing *Triomf*, which will be an “art movie”, to the recent international production *Catch a Fire*, which deals with an episode in the anti-apartheid struggle, Raeburn comments that it might have been easier to finance than *Triomf* because “that’s what we expect -- good blacks and bad whites. But *Triomf* isn’t about that. It’s about this family, this incestuous world, the claustrophobia of Afrikanerdom -- which is about to end and something new is about to start” when the story takes place on the eve of the 1994 elections.

The novel and the film-to-be mean a lot to him. “The power of it reminded me of Tennessee Williams, of Sam Shepard -- I was thrilled when Sam Shepard loved the script.” Yet, he says, “It’s been a long haul ... What a hard sell this film has been! I’m exhausted! But this is one of those films whose time is coming.”