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TRIOMF IS RE-BORN ON SCREEN

“Lekker, Scary, Funny,” that’s what 16 year-old Michael Mellor thinks the movie version of Marlene van Niekerk’s award-winning novel “Triomf” will be like when it reaches the big screen. Michael, whose favourite movie of all time is “Rush Hour 3”, lives with his boozy parents next to Cosmos Circle in the desolate mini-suburb of Jan Hofmeyr nestled beneath Johannesburg’s Brixton Tower.

The ragged working class neighbourhood is serving as the central location for the film and according to director Michael Raeburn it’s perfect, “It’s terrific. If I had asked a studio boss to get a designer to build the main location as a set, it would not have been as perfect as what I have found here underneath the Brixton tower.” Raeburn is delighted by Mellor’s keen observation and has scrawled “Lekker, Scary, Funny” on the cover page of his script.

It’s been a seven-year trek for Raeburn to get to Cosmos Circle and last week he finally wrapped the shoot of his adaptation of Van Niekerk’s award-winning novel about a dysfunctional poor white family on the eve of the 1994 elections. The novel delves into the dynamics of the Benade family who are so concerned about the implications of the country’s first democratic elections that they’re stockpiling petrol supplies to prepare for an escape “when the shit hits the fan!”

Mol, her brothers Pop and Treppie and son Lambert are extreme people - rattled by alcoholism, mental illness and poverty. Mol has an incestuous relationship with her son, who in turn is slightly retarded and prone to epileptic fits, while the violent Treppie is driven by demons. Living in isolation and dreading the upcoming elections and a new ‘free’ South Africa the family are desperate to escape; but are forever trapped within themselves and their kin. They are scruffy, tawdry, wretched and even ridiculous characters - a microcosm of history’s has-beens, and although Van Niekerk’s book is mercilessly funny it’s also touched by a heartbreaking poignancy.

Raeburn co-wrote the screen adaptation with Malcolm Kohll and has condensed the novel into the five days preceding the election. The book was given to him by someone who thought he was the right person to make a

film of it, "I saw the potential of a fable about the end of an old world and the beginning of a new one all hidden away behind a universal story of a poor white and dysfunctional family. It's very much in the mood of Sam Shepherd and Tennessee Williams. In fact Shepherd read the script and loved it. It's got this heady mix of mad humour and dangerous emotional intensity that's very unique."

In 2000 he optioned the rights and even though he's had Tim Roth, Emma Thompson and Jessica Lange attached to the project at various times, raising the finance was a trying experience for Raeburn. "The film does not fall into a safe category. It is highly disturbing to everyone here or overseas. It is also politically incorrect to everyone. Here people say - we tried to get rid of these people for 3 centuries, why must we now see a film about them; overseas the film is not a costume drama or an action adventure of some sort, and it is not a film about bad rich whites and good poor blacks - so to some it is irrelevant."

He was met with blank stares or rejection by most investors including the National Film and Video Foundation, "Local investors in general did not feel this film will improve their social or corporate profile. But in the end it's just the story of a family - you will be attached to some characters and afraid of others. It's also a very funny story in a dark way and so in that sense it could take place anywhere in the world. I mean if a movie like this was set in America, no one would say it was letting down the country."

The film was originally budgeted at 6.5 million Euros but Raeburn couldn't raise the finance. Eventually he was so desperate he placed classified ads in publications ranging from Farmer's Weekly to the magazine of St. George's College in Bulawayo where the filmmaker matriculated in 1965. And it was through his alma mater that he found his 'angel' - a private investor, London-based financial analyst Lyndon Plant, who executive produced the movie which has come in at about 10% of its original "Hollywood" budget.

It's Plant's first foray into the world of filmmaking and Raeburn says he's an incredibly quick learner and has been amazingly supportive. "I was getting a bit tired of the world of corporate finance," says Plant, "so this was a bit of a 'walk on the wild side' for me." Raeburn and he met up in March this year and the financier says, "The Eureka moment came when I realised I wouldn't be making an investment in a movie. I said to Michael I'm making an investment in you. From then on we've spoken of the production as a

creative partnership so it's not as if he feels like he's talking to his bank manager."

Plant's handshake was the key to getting the production into the fast lane – Raeburn then teamed up with Natalie Stange and Ryan Fortune of Red Pill productions to be the South African line producers and the extensive rehearsal period with the actors began.

Lionel Newton who plays Treppie in the film says, "Marlene's writing is so dense. I mean the book is 470 pages and you can't hope to put it all in a movie but Michael's script is a remarkable condensation. A film is never going to be the complete sonnet, anyway with a camera you can knock off an entire paragraph in one second."

Newton was desperate for the part but Raeburn wasn't entirely convinced. A few months later when Newton heard the director was in Johannesburg he flew up "as" Treppie. That meant not bathing or shaving for four days, grabbing the most down at heel clothes he could from a thrift store, gaffer taping his shoes together, and then drinking like a red-wine glutton whilst on the flight. "It was a wonder I wasn't chucked off, but I arrived at the meeting completely fucked. Michael didn't even know who I was."

It proved to be the right tactic and Newton has relished the experience, "I've played a lot of depraved characters, I've played Macbeth but I've never done anything as dark as Treppie. There are so many polytones to his character - bitterness, anger, loneliness, self-indulgence, hubris – he's past anything this guy, he's basically walking scar tissue."

Vanessa Cooke who plays Mol is as enthused as Newton about the film and the way it deals with the story of a family on the brink of madness, "It's actually not about politics, it's about relationships, messed-up relationships and although the shoot has been hard we've all worked incredibly well together, I really think that everyone on this shoot is doing it for the right reasons."

The shoot was taxing due largely to the unusually stormy weather that plagued them from the first day of shooting, "This is a story that's supposed to take place in searing sunshine but from the 25th of September when we started shooting it started raining. There were even tornado warnings in Joburg – it was like we were on the top of Ben Nevis," says Raeburn, "I

don't know, perhaps it was Paul Kruger or the boeregods taking exception to us telling the story of his misplaced people.”

As the filmmakers re-shuffled the schedule they faced yet another blow when the production office was broken into and the hard-drive containing six days of audio from the shoot was stolen. They'll have to replace the dialogue in a studio once the picture has been edited.

However Raeburn, who is best known for his film adaptation of Doris Lessing's "The Grass Is Singing" which shared hallucinatory themes of madness as well as Zimbabwe's first feature film the comedic musical "Jit", can be pleased that it's in the can; that he doesn't have to trawl forever looking for finance in development hell and that he doesn't have a Jessica Lange or a Tim Roth – he has ended up with the genuine article at a fraction of the price and something that's going to be "Lekker, Scary, Funny".