

PJ Harvey makes an album that's her all-too-underrated career in miniature

JOSH TYRANGIEL ON MUSIC

Arts

MOVIES MUSIC BOOKS EXHIBITIONS FASHION ARCHITECTURE



Thumbs up Films like *Triomf*, about life in a poor white suburb, explore themes besides reconciliation

MOVIES

Beyond Black and White. Hollywood loves apartheid's tales. But South Africans want to tell the nation's stories themselves

BY ALEX PERRY/CAPE TOWN

TAKE ONE OF THE GREATEST MOMENTS in modern American sports history, the "Miracle on Ice," when the U.S. ice-hockey team unexpectedly defeated the Soviet Union at the 1980 Olympics. Add in an avuncular presidential candidate—Ronald Reagan—who would come to tap the victory's almost mythical national significance to sell the idea of a new American dawn. Turn it all into a movie. Who would

you cast? Arnold Vosloo as Reagan and Presley Chweneyagae as U.S. hockey team captain Mike Eruzione, right? No?

Now you know how many South Africans feel about the arrival in Cape Town of Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon to shoot a Clint Eastwood movie about South Africa's 1995 Rugby World Cup victory over the New Zealand All Blacks. It's not that Freeman (playing President Nelson Mandela) or Damon (who stars as Springbok captain Francois Pienaar) will do a bad job.

South African actors Vosloo (*The Mummy*) and Chweneyagae (the Oscar-winning *Tsotsi*) wouldn't either. It's just a little strange that South Africa's most important stories are so often told by foreigners. "Imagine how the Americans would feel if we cast a South African as Martin Luther King," says Johannesburg-based producer and film financier Paul Raleigh. "It's like the old Westerns, when the Indian chiefs were white guys in make-up. It's just wrong."

Raleigh is part of a new generation of

South African filmmakers determined to take back the country's stories and invest them with a spirit that goes deeper than skin. He produced 2005's *Tsotsi*, a film about a township hoodlum who steals a car—and the rich black couple's baby in its back seat—which shattered once and for all the naive but, among outsiders, popular notion that all South Africa's stories can be framed in terms of black and white. Another is director Michael Raeburn, who has just released *Triomf*, a bleak examination of a poor Johannesburg family—who happen to be white. “There's suddenly a sense in South Africa that we don't have to make films only about truth and reconciliation,” says Raeburn. “We can make romantic comedies, gay movies, horror movies—anything we like. There's a real energy out there. It's a real creative moment.”

At the end of apartheid, South Africa had no film industry to speak of. Filmmakers had either been co-opted by the white regime for propaganda or driven underground. Foreign filmmakers—whose big budgets can help prop up smaller local industries—had stayed away. With apartheid gone and sanctions lifted, that changed. Television commercial producers from around the globe discovered that Cape Town combined a spectacular location with skilled, cheap crews. Movie makers found that South Africa's diverse landscape—savannah to desert, winelands to white-sand beaches—could stand in for almost anywhere, while the people of the Rainbow Nation, with a carefully placed sombrero here or a hijab there, could be almost anyone. Hollywood descended. In the last few years, South Africa has doubled as 16th century England, Iraq, Mexico, the earth in 10,000 B.C. and outer space—as well as other parts of Africa. As a result, Cape Town now finds itself home to a thriving film industry that employs 25,000 people and contributes some \$800 million a year to South Africa's economy, according to Laurence Mitchell of the Cape Film Commission.

If Hollywood found a great backdrop for its movies, it also fell in love with South Africa's stories. The end of apartheid narrative in particular—an epic of racist repression that climaxes in a transcendent moment of redemption under an iconic leader—is a movie script made real. And Hollywood has shot that script over and over again. In 2004, Samuel L. Jackson and Juliette Binoche made *In My Country* about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in the mid- to late '90s, and Hilary Swank starred as an attorney representing a black South African political activist seeking amnesty in *Red Dust*. Then came *Catch a Fire* (terrorism during apartheid) with

Color Visions. Filmmakers tackle apartheid—with mixed results



Mapantsula Telling it like it was

Hits

Cry Freedom 1987

A white journalist risks everything to dig into the death of black activist Steve Biko

Mapantsula 1988

The story of a petty criminal's political awakening paints a vivid, honest picture of township life under apartheid

Cry, The Beloved Country 1995

Two fathers, one black and one white, are united through the loss of their sons



In My Country Romance apartheid-style

Misses

Pure Blood 2000

Surrealism, vampirism, incest—and an undercurrent of anti-white-rule sentiment

In My Country 2004

A black journalist and a white poet fall in love as they listen to accounts of torment at the Truth and Reconciliation hearings

Goodbye Bafana 2007

The true story of Mandela's friendship with his white prison guard goes dull on screen

Tim Robbins in 2006 and *Goodbye Bafana* (the friendship between Mandela and his white prison guard) with Joseph Fiennes in 2007. This year brings *Endgame*, a thriller about the secret talks to end apartheid starring William Hurt and Jonny Lee Miller. In February, as Ving Rhames was wrapping *Master Harold...and the Boys*—a film about the relationship between a white boy and his black servant—Damon and Freeman arrived for their rugby turn.

But Hollywood's obsession with South Africa hasn't carried over into the box of-

fice. Many of the U.S. films of the past few years have struggled to get a release. Those that have, flopped. Why? “Audiences like authenticity—something that's real and from the heart,” says producer Raleigh. The truth is that no country is ever as simple as black and white, let alone one with South Africa's unrivaled ethnic mix and bloody history. When *Tsotsi* won its best foreign film Oscar in 2006, the cast and crew went to Mandela's house for a celebration. “After he congratulated us, he told us: ‘We should be very careful of our South African stories,’” says Kenneth Nkosi, who played *Tsotsi*'s friend Aap. “Do not tell our stories in the wrong way. Remember that there is no one in the world who is not flawed.” He was saying: ‘I am a man. I am not this perfect icon Hollywood makes me out to be. That's not the truth.’ And a movie that doesn't ring true is a movie that's no good.”

South Africa's filmmakers are taking that advice to heart. They still crew and act for Hollywood, but the country now churns out a steady roll of its own excellent small films. The year before *Tsotsi* won its Oscar, South Africa missed out on one for *Yesterday*, the story of an HIV-infected mother bringing up her daughter in dirt-poor KwaZulu Natal. In 2007 came *Bunny Chow*, a hip black-and-white comedy about three comedians traveling to a festival that recalled early Spike Lee. Last year featured *Jerusalem*, a sophisticated thriller about the rise and fall of a Johannesburg slumlord—a kind of South African *American Gangster*—which made its star, Rapulana Seiphemo, the new face of South African cinema. Later this year Seiphemo teams up with *Tsotsi*'s Nkosi in *White Wedding*, a road movie that, with impressive maturity, plays apartheid's legacy of racial division for laughs.

With South Africa taking ownership of its stories, the country's best talent is sticking around to help with the telling. In the past, successful stars or filmmakers like Vosloo or *Tsotsi* director Gavin Hood would have left for Los Angeles. Charlize Theron, South Africa's biggest star, never even acted at home. But Nkosi, who was cast in Peter Jackson's upcoming alien blockbuster *District 9*, shot in Soweto last year, says that while he's happy to act for Hollywood, he has no wish to act in it. South Africa is too exciting. “We were shut away from the world and each other for so long. But now we are getting to know each other. Now we are telling our own stories,” he says. “This is not just about making movies. This is about our changing political landscape, our democracy, the fact that anyone can say anything now. This is about shaping a nation.”