
FILM REVIEW: TSOTSI (SOUTH AFRICA)

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Release: 2006

In Tsotsitaal with English subtitles



South Africa's *Tsotsi*, this year's Oscar winner for Best Foreign Language Film, tells a poignant tale of crime, love and hope in the city of Johannesburg. The movie, at times furious, at times reflective, is the story of one man's road to personal redemption. With *Tsotsi* winning another five awards (at film festivals in Edinburgh, Thessaloniki, Los Angeles, Toronto) and a Golden Globe nomination for Best Foreign Film, the South African movie industry finally seems to have gained international recognition.

Tsotsi, which means gangster in South African township vernacular, is based on the 1980 novel of the same name by the South African playwright, Athol Fugard. The movie tells the story of Tsotsi (played by debut actor, Presley Chweneyagae), a small-fry criminal, whose gang robs, and occasionally kills, commuters on Johannesburg's notoriously dangerous suburban trains. One night, after beating up one of his gang-members, he steals a car from a wealthy suburban house only to discover a baby in the backseat. Instead of abandoning the baby, he takes it with him into his shack in the townships, where it changes his life.

Tsotsi is remarkable in shying away from conventional apartheid-inspired themes: the criminals are black, as are the victims. Indeed, the only white character in the movie, a police officer (played by Ian Roberts), often speaks in Zulu. As such, the movie depicts the new

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realities of post-Apartheid South Africa, a country where wealth, poverty and violence are all in flux. The story is complemented by an excellent soundtrack (with songs by Zola, one of South Africa's major kwaito stars) that reflects the vibe of modern-day Johannesburg. It is filmed almost entirely in Tsotsitaal, the township vernacular that mixes Zulu, Sotho and Afrikaans.

Tsotsi has some shortcomings. The movie fails at times to make the most of its story: characters remain too schematic; their motives, their fears, their hopes remain sketchy; at times dialogue is replaced by long close-up shots that seek to convey drama and poignancy, but often fail to do so. As a result, the movie never seems to gain much pace, and at times it is only the vibrant soundtrack that infuses some action into the scenes. The film could have gained from better visually integrating Johannesburg's dramatic changes since 1994. This confinement may have been intentional by director Gavin Hood, but one never gains a feel for the city and the world in which the characters live, and die.

With *Tsotsi*, the South African movie industry finally seems to have emerged as a force to be reckoned with. For many years, post-apartheid South Africa appeared unable to produce movies that would deal with the manifold issues that the new country was facing. While the freedom struggle of the 1970-80s inspired some major movies such as *Cry Freedom* (necessarily produced outside of the country), the South African film output after 1994 remained anemic, bar the occasional slapstick movie featuring South Africa's veteran comedian, Leon Schuster. Whatever creative visual activity there was in the country seemed to be mostly funneled into its thriving television and advertising industry.

Over the past few years, however, an increasing number of local movies have hit the international circuit. Last year, a South African film, *uCarmen eKhayelitsha*, an adaptation of Bizet's *Carmen* set in Cape Town's townships, won the Golden Bear for Best Film at the 2005 Berlin International Film Festival, while *Yesterday*, a film about HIV/AIDS, was nominated for an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film. The year before, Charlize Theron, a South African actress, won an Oscar for her performance in the US-produced *Monster*, about a female serial killer.

Tsotsi's success is likely to spur the emergence of more South African movies. Already, the state-owned Industrial Development Corporation has been providing R500 million in commitments to the local industry since 2001. What is now needed is for more local talent to engage with the complexities of the new South Africa. This may take some time, however: South African society remains scarred by the trauma of apartheid, and many viewers seem to prefer the easy escapism of Hollywood-inspired movies. Only when local directors produce movies that inspire both critics and ordinary viewers, will South Africa's film industry have truly come of age.