

Identity in focus

By Karen van Schalkwyk



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There are very few films in our current industry that examine the complexity of male identity and specifically South African males in the context of army conscription. A new 10-minute art film has been produced that examines how conscription alters, changes or forms that identity.

Paul Emmanuel's film, *3 SAI Rite of Passage*, examines this theme. Emmanuel explains: "The film came into being because of my recent obsession with capturing moments of transition in male identity, specifically the head-shaving rituals of young recruits at Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley (3-SAD). I am fascinated with rites of passage and how these constructed dramas play a role in determining how societies' belief systems are created and perpetuated."

Emmanuel's journey has been a long creative process. "I started documenting these evocative images photographically almost four years ago and then

spent months scratching entire sequences of them into large sheets of black exposed photographic emulsion with a blade.

"When you first see the images, they look like photographs on a filmstrip but on closer inspection they reveal themselves as intimate studies of an unidentifiable male undergoing 'a change in his status'. This change is impossible to capture, but what can be seen is some sort of physical change in his appearance - like head shaving - moments in which a man voluntarily lets go or is forced to let go of his identity and take on another. The military is a very powerful agent for constructing notions of masculinity."

Emmanuel elaborates that a context for capturing these shifts in male identity was the military. "During the apartheid years, only white men had to undergo this enforced process. Today, the South Africa National Defence Force (SANDF) is very different from the apartheid military machine of the 1980s.

While doing research at the South African military archives in Pretoria, I came across a copy of an introductory pamphlet given to new white recruits. It was called *Figure in Brown*. As young men of 18 or 19 during the 1980s you opened it up and it read: 'You are now stepping out of the shoes of a boy into the shoes of a man.'

The film, while looking to the past, is about the current military. "The film depicts men of all races being recruited. There are only two remaining military bases left in South Africa which still conduct formal head shaving of their new recruits en masse, on the premises on the day of induction: the Third South African Infantry (3 SAI) and the other in Oudtshoorn."

Emmanuel explains that this question of male identity has been in his conscious and subconscious mind for many years. "A lot of my work is inspired by short dreams and 'flash visions'. The work and the film come from a sense of witnessing an event as if



of creating a visual treatment, turning my art-speak into film speak and raising the funds."

Emmanuel then went through the process of creating a storyboard, etchings, drawings and images from previous work. "Once in production, I had to create storyboards and shot lists with drawings and text. I then had to quite literally get the concept of each shot from inside my head into the head of the producer and DOP. This process was very important, as there was no easily discernible logical narrative. We shot on 16mm and 35mm film, and each shot had to be immaculately planned as we did not have a big budget."

Emmanuel continues: "I have very fond memories of Matthew and Eran's (Eran Tahor, DOP) disbelieving expressions after explaining what I wanted to do with some shots on our tiny budget. The film contains landscape imagery taken from the Gariep Dam and wide open grasslands in the Free State. There are time lapse sequences and a crane shot. We took enormous risks and were extremely lucky."

The film and work will be exhibited via a travelling museum art exhibition called *Transitions* which opens at the Apartheid Museum in September, and moves to The Olievenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein and then the William Humphreys Art Gallery in Kimberley. It has also been accepted at The Centraal Museum in Utrecht. 🌐

transfixed by an unfolding drama, almost like being lulled into a momentary daydream. I thought it more evocative to capture the images as one would a documentary, which is also interesting because there is a staged and constructed factor in all rites of passage."

Emmanuel explains how the film came about. "I was fortunate to walk into Matthew Kramer's office of Format Digital Production in 2006. I told him about my idea, and his response was instant: we will do it. My long time agent and project manager, Les Cohn of Art Source South Africa, then took me through the first steps

Festival of image

Twenty four feature-length films, including dramas, comedies and documentaries, as well as eight short films, all chosen out of 300 submissions, will comprise the programme for this year's Out in Africa Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, which runs in Johannesburg (Nu Metro Killarney Mall) from 4 to 14 September and in Cape Town (Nu Metro V&A Waterfront) from 11 to 21 September.

Six of the short films were produced in South Africa. Festival director Nodi Murphy notes that in the past there were more local films. "However, if you specialise in queer films in this country you'll starve. But it's encouraging that public

broadcaster SABC is becoming more adventurous, having commissioned *After 9* and *Society*. The latter has another season coming up."

Now in its 15th year, the festival has focused on servicing more of its community and increasing black representation in terms of accessibility (ie. location and transport) as well as representation on screen.

According to Murphy, it has been practically impossible to find queer features that had significant black representation. "Our solutions have been to provide transport and tickets for peri-urban / township dwellers, organising satellite festivals

in small cities and towns, and pushing harder for films with black representation. We have run four filmmaking workshops since 2004 and have produced 20 short films by predominantly black filmmakers (novices mostly) that have been seen all over the world."

Common to all the films in this year's festival line-up, irrespective of storyline or genre, is the struggle, not just for tolerance, but for acceptance by others and of self. Murphy believes the festival has helped a great number of people to come out. "This is a festival of image - queers getting to see themselves on screen."

She notes that the films

this year are of uneven quality - some with great production values that could fit into the mainstream, others low budget with poor production values but with great subject matter. "What's really interesting for me is the emergence of a transgender community and movement. The challenge they present to gender construction - in language, in physique, in sexuality - is really exciting."

Although the festival has reached a plateau regarding numbers, the age and colour of its audience is changing. There is also a small percentage (between 10 and 15% of the total audience) of heterosexuals who come to the festival to see something different. Last year there were 20 000 visitors to the festival, with another 2 000 at the satellite festivals.

Talking about the social

significance of the festival, Murphy points out that it was created on the premise that homophobia exists. "When it comes to sexuality, cinema has reflected heterosexual lifestyles and values as the norm and, until very recently, portrayed homosexuality as a pathology. For the same reason the emergence of gay cinema, most of it produced by the independent sector, has had a powerful impact on how gay people see themselves and in shaping gay identity."

Some of the titles to be seen at the festival are the Oscar-nominated *For the Bible tells me so*; *25 Cent Preview*; *XXY*; and *Rampant: How a city stopped a plague*. For more information about films, the Producers Seminar and the panel discussions log onto www.oia.co.za. 🌐