

Dodd, A. SOUNDSCAPES PAINSTAKINGLY CREATED in Business Day Arts, Business Day, Johannesburg, April

WHAT is the sound of hair falling?" It might seem like a curiously obscure question to most, but to sound designer Wilbert Schubel, it was central to the creation of the soundtrack to artist Paul Emmanuel's spellbinding film, *3SA! A Rite of Passage*. The 12-minute film (the axis of Emmanuel's exhibition, *Transitions*, on show at the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein, after a run at the Apartheid Museum) documents the head-shaving of new recruits at the Third South African Infantry Battalion in Kimberley, one of two national military training camps, which still performs the obligatory hair-shaving of fresh recruits.

Although the film begins in the straight documentary mode, it swiftly transforms into a deep and haunting meditation on masculinity, change, militarism and shifting race relations. Emmanuel's images and Schubel's music pull the viewer into an altered state of feeling and imagining that dwells just beneath the skin of the real.

Yet, just as you are pulled into this world of affect, the music jolts you almost violently back into the world of the immediate and the prosaic — the sound of the electric shaver as locks of youthful hair fall to the ground.... But soon enough the poetic swoon of the music tugs you back into the inner life of feeling, memory, fear and loss.

"I think one of Paul's main focal points was the idea of the hair falling being a kind of loss of innocence, a loss of childhood, a kind of shaving away layers of identity," says Schubel, one of SA's most accomplished sound designers.

"And those images of the shaven heads become quite spiritual, like monks' heads — that element of sacrifice, perhaps. And out of that came the use of bells, gongs — all those resonant kinds of sounds that I used."

Schubel scores music with colours and textures, rather than instruments, in mind.

"Any sound texture that I might need is 99% there already, stored in vast online libraries of sound. And if it's not there, I'll create it through the use of processing or a combination of sounds."

The film's soundtrack is made up of a vast range of different sonic elements, from documentary sounds, to found and instrumental sounds: the sound of a cricket, of a bell, the wind ... but it all started at the piano.

"I had a clip of the film on my laptop and, early one morning, I put it on my grand piano and started playing, and I just knew that the grand piano was going to be one of the instruments," says Schubel.

"Then, a couple of days later, Paul phoned and said he had woken up in the middle of the night and heard trains. At the time, I thought it was the last thing that needed to go into the film, but I didn't say anything. And the more I let it be, the more I let it percolate in the back

of my mind, the more I felt it was right. I started collecting sounds related to trains: shunting sounds, steam chugging, whistles, the clacking, the creak, which I've changed so it becomes almost like a bovine moan." The train metaphor ended up being central to the soundtrack, evoking different time zones and different states of reality.

Schubel, who works as a final mix engineer in the film and TV industry, says Emmanuel's project allowed him an immense amount of freedom, which he doesn't generally get on commercial projects.