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# Joe Bullet

## Louis de Witt

**Producer** Tonie van der Merwe. **Production company** Bullit Films (Cape Town, South Africa). **Director** Louis de Witt.

**Screenplay** Tonie van der Merwe. **Director of photography** Louis de Witt. **Music** Silver Threads. **Editor** Oscar Burn.

**Cast** Ken Gampu (Joe Bullet), Abigail Kubeka (Beauty), Jimmy Sabe (Popeye), Cocky "Two Bull" Tlholthalemaje (Flash), Sidney Charma (Jerry), Dan Poho (President), Sol Rachilo (Sonny), Matthew Molete (Spike), Richard Khumalo (Lucas), Henry Siduma (Henry).

DCP, colour. 85 min. English.

**World sales** Rushlake Media

*Joe Bullet* must have been an extraordinary sight to Sowetan cinema-goers in 1973. Ken Gampu's on-screen presence echoed Roundtree's Shaft or Connery's Bond in his sheer, suave physicality. Rooted firmly in the action tradition, the film's plot centres on a shadowy mobster trying to fix a championship football final. There is intrigue, murder, and only one person to call – Joe Bullet!

In making the film, businessman-turned-producer Tonie van der Merwe, hoped to reach a new market. In step with 1970s black popular culture, the film was indebted to Blaxploitation cinema and was importantly, one of the first with an all-black cast that included stars like Gampu and Abigail Kubeka. Not only did *Joe Bullet* offer a thrilling new hero to audiences, but also a wholly different vision of black life than known at the time. This was an image of agency, aspiration and power, at odds with the realities of most non-white South Africans under apartheid. Despite having no overt oppositional politic, the film was quickly banned and remained unseen for decades.

Recently restored, *Joe Bullet* is a compelling, complex piece of South African cinema history and one which deserves a contemporary reappraisal.

*Darryl Els*

## “We wanted to create a black James Bond”

*How did you come to make Joe Bullet?*

**Tonie van der Merwe:** I had a construction company in those days. We had about two hundred black workers and they stayed in the company compound and had nothing to do at the weekend. We always hired a projector and a film on Saturday nights and we screened it to everyone. I then met Elmo and Louis de Witt; they used to be well known in the South African film industry. Then one day Louis said to me, ‘Why don’t you make your own movie?’ Louis convinced me and I had to finance the whole movie, I knew nothing! The movie took eighteen months to make, a long period, and it cost a lot of money – it was a very expensive movie for those days. We made a lot of mistakes... but I learned... I paid for it! Eventually, the movie was finished and we had a few screenings at the Eyethu, a cinema in Soweto, and then the film was banned.

We had endless problems with the authorities while we were shooting. They harassed you, raided your offices and your studios and looked in your cameras and film stock. If you went to Soweto to film, they would send somebody with you all the time, checking on what you were shooting. [*The football game sequence is an example of this, where several white police agents are visible amongst the crowd monitoring the production of the film. –Darryl Els*]

*What were the influences for the film? Were you aware of Blaxploitation cinema in the United States at the time?*

When we made *Joe Bullet* we looked at *Shaft* (USA 1971, Gordon Parks) and we looked at a couple of other black movies. We wanted to create a black James Bond; that was the whole idea, in those days there were no black African heroes or figures to look up to. We succeeded to such an extent that in townships, no matter where in the country, they recognised Ken Gampu and the other actors and mobbed them – it was quite something!

*How did you go about casting the film?*

When we started I thought, ‘Well, we have to begin somewhere...’ I had a storyline and then came the actors. In those days there was only one black actor who had a name and that was Ken Gampu, because he had starred in *Dingaka* (1964) by Jamie Uys. I made contact with Ken and we became great friends... He suggested we use Cocky ‘Two Bull’ (Cocky Tlholthalemaje) and then we got him and Abigail Kubeka and then everyone suggested Joe Lopez. They actually did the casting for me on *Joe Bullet* because I didn’t know the actors.

*Did you expect the film to be banned?*

Never in my life! I can’t remember exactly, but the points on the banning order were ridiculous like, ‘A black man is seen owning a firearm. This will teach the blacks how to handle guns...’ The censors gave ridiculous reasons for banning it! The newspapers said it was the first South African film to be banned outright. Normally the censors would say, ‘do a few cuts’ or, ‘there has to be an age restriction’. I think the only reason it was banned outright was because they didn’t know what to do.

*Darryl Els, Marie-Hélène Gutberlet*

After *Joe Bullet*, Tonie van de Merwe continued working in the film industry and went on to successfully lobby the South African government in the 1970s for the implementation of a new film subsidy called the B-Scheme. For more information, see *Umbango*.

**Louis de Witt** (1938-1995) began his career as an assistant at the South African production company Kavalier Film. He became one of the most sought-after cinematographers in South Africa, and he worked on more than twenty films with directors such as Jamie Uys, Jans Rautenbach, Dirk de Villiers and Bertrand Retief. In 1970, Louis de Witt teamed up with Tonie van der Merwe, who produced *Joe Bullet*, de Witt’s first and only film as director. Upon completion of the film, he formed his own production company, Mojadji Films.

The presentation of the restored prints of *Joe Bullet* (Louis de Witt, South Africa 1971) and *Umbango* (Tonie van der Merwe, South Africa 1988) is in the context of the research project ‘B-Schemes’ by Darryl Els, which is dedicated to the critical reappraisal and presentation of South Africa’s so-called ‘B-Scheme’ films, which have previously not been the focus of much research. The work by Darryl Els is part of the Visionary Archive project, a collaborative trans-local experiment in five different places and in five different archival contexts. The five partner institutions are: Cimatheque – Alternative Film Centre in Cairo; the independent cinema The Bioscope in Johannesburg; the archive of the late filmmaker Gadalla Gubara in Khartoum; the Geba Filmes association in Bissau; and Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art e.V.. Visionary Archive is supported by the TURN fund of the German Federal Cultural Foundation.