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# Umbango

## The Feud

### Tonie van der Merwe

**Producer** Steve Hand. **Production company** Jaguar Films (Durban, South Africa). **Director** Tonie van der Merwe. **Screenplay** Pat Johnston. **Director of photography** Tonie van der Merwe. **Sound** Edwin Knopf.

**Cast** Innocent „Popo“ Gumede, Kay Magubane, Hector Mathanda, Dumisani Shongwe, Vusi Gudazi, Fikile Majози, Mao Mkhwanazi, Emmanuel Shangase, Vincent Velekazi.

DCP, colour. 69 min. Zulu.

**World sales** Gravel Road Entertainment Group

*Umbango* is that rarest of cinematic curiosities – a South African western filmed entirely in isiZulu with an all-black cast (bar the hapless ‘Gringo’) and produced in the dying days of Apartheid.

A product of the B-Scheme – a government film subsidy which saw scores of films ostensibly made by white producers for black audiences between 1973 and 1990 – *Umbango* is one of the few surviving Westerns from that time. Starring Popo Gumede and Hector Mathanda (channeling Zulu versions of Bud Spencer and Terence Hill), as Jet and Owen, this is a Wild West fable of good pitted against evil, and vengeance against forgiveness. When the merciless and powerful Kay Kay rides into town to avenge his brother’s death, Jet and Owen must stand together and head for the final high noon showdown.

As with *Joe Bullet*, this film shows the influence of American cinema on B-Scheme films and importantly, the manner in which genres were appropriated and repurposed to suit the scheme’s mix of mass entertainment and moral messaging. *Umbango* was one of the last films to be produced under the subsidy, which was to collapse by the end of the decade, mired in allegations of corruption.

Darryl Els

## Films for a black audience: South Africa and the B-Scheme film subsidy

In the early 1970s, the South African government introduced a subsidy for film productions aimed at black African audiences. This subsidy was referred to as the 'B-Scheme' and was in part modelled on the general or 'A-Scheme' – an incentive for Afrikaans- and English-language cinema. From 1973 until 1990, hundreds, if not thousands, of films were cheaply produced, widely circulated and just as quickly forgotten. The impetus for the subsidy stemmed in part from producer Tonie van der Merwe's experiences with the production, banning and lost opportunities of *Joe Bullet*. Tonie recalls: 'At that stage [after the production of *Joe Bullet*] there was no subsidy for black films, but Heyns Films was getting financing from the government for a newsreel. I thought to myself, why not make a movie in the Zulu language, which is the strongest [sic] language. I went to see the Department of Industries, and parliament granted their request for the subsidy. So I made *Ngomopho* (1974), which [was the first] Zulu movie. And it took off immediately. It was like a wildfire the way this thing spread through the country. Several months later, Thys Heyns made a black movie [sic]... so that was how it started...'

### The system got out of hand

The lack of exhibition infrastructure where such films could be screened led to the creation of extensive mobile cinema circuits. Often owned by the production companies themselves, these units would exhibit films in rural areas and South Africa's homelands or 'Bantustans' (territories created for specific ethnic groups of black South Africans). Screenings of films like *Umbango* took place mostly in schools, churches and community halls. The subsidy was based on a return on ticket sales, and this combined with the informality of the exhibition circuit invariably led to corruption. Van der Merwe: 'A lot of guys just [made up audience attendance numbers]... and how do you check it? There was no way that the government in Pretoria could check it, they don't even know where's Kraggas Quarrel [sic] or how to get there? There's no communication, there's no telephone... The subsidy encouraged you to make bad movies. The cheaper you can make the movie, the more profit you can make. And that's how the thing got totally out of hand... Some people would take a roll of film [which] took eleven minutes and they would shoot that in one take, then they change magazines [and] carry on, so it was like filming a stage show. Or they would go and film a soccer match and say that was a movie. There were some really bad movies... I think one year there were nearly a thousand movies made... Some guys were claiming ten, twenty million rand a year in subsidies [one to two million US dollars]... It was totally, totally wrong. And eventually it crashed and they took the subsidy away...'

Still, as van der Merwe explains, the system did create a sizable industry with a ready audience, '...but we did become an industry, we were much bigger than Ster Kinekor [the largest South African cinema chain] on the distribution side and we produced more movies than the white production houses did in ten years. So it became big. It was a massive market and I always realised the black market is the market for the future; the white market is too small.' Historically, the films produced under the B-Scheme have largely been dismissed by critics. This is in part due to the low production values of many of the films, but more to the argument that as a state intervention, the subsidy had little to do with the actual promotion and growth of a formal and sustainable black African

film industry. Many critics saw the scheme as collusion between the apartheid state and the white-dominated film industry, who were acting as its ideological proxies, driven by an economic imperative.

### A renewed public interest

The recent restoration of many of these films has seen them re-emerge into circulation, screening in cinemas, at film festivals and on national television in South Africa. This renewed public and academic interest raises the issue of how cinema and heritage is viewed in post-apartheid South Africa. Litheko Modisane, author of *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (2013), poses a number of intriguing questions around this point: 'The conversation around heritage and those films is a very important one. Do you call these films part of the cultural heritage of South Africa or do you exclude them? How do you deal with films that are produced as a part of a modernity which in itself has a lot of problems in terms of social-political relationships? The conversation has to go to the extent of raising questions of what does it mean for white filmmakers who were privileged at the time to be able to produce these films when black people were not able to do so – what does it mean if such an inheritance is now called heritage?'

The B-Scheme films highlight the complexities of cultural production under apartheid. Although some may argue that these films reinforced the ideology of racial capitalism, they also resonated widely with their intended audiences. Modisane reminds us, 'that texts are not reducible to their authors' intentions, but are ever subject to engagements that stem from the intricate social and political relations of which they are a part... the outcome of which may make possible new strategies of relating to power in all its forms.'

Certainly, the B-Scheme films demand a contemporary reflection, most specifically in the area of audience reception and in the influence of other pop cultural media of the time (such as comics and radio plays). Viewing previously unavailable and newly restored films like *Umbango* today allows us the chance to reconsider this forgotten era of South African cinema history.

Darryl Els

*Excerpts from interview with Tonie van der Merwe, recorded 23 October 2014 by Darryl Els and Marie-Hélène Gutberlet. Excerpts from interview with Litheko Modisane, recorded 29 October 2014 by Darryl Els and Marie-Hélène Gutberlet.*



Tonie van der Merwe was born in 1940 in South Africa. The qualified mathematics teacher worked as a blasting manager for the oil industry, as well as an aircraft pilot, before meeting Louis de Witt and becoming his producer on the film *Joe Bullet*. After this film, van der Merwe worked on more than 300 films as producer, director, cinematographer or editor. Tonie van der Merwe is considered the father of the black film industry in South Africa.

### Films

1975: *Trompie*. 1979: *Botsotso*. 1980: *Botsotso II*. 1982: *Bullet on the Run*. 1987: *Operation Hit Squad*. 1989: *Barrett*. 1990: *Fatal Mission*. 1990: *Fishy Stones*. 1988: *Umbango / The Feud*.

The presentation of the restored prints of *Umbango* (Tonie van der Merwe, South Africa 1988) and *Joe Bullet* (Louis de Witt, South Africa 1971) 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.