

Dust to dust ...

South Africa absolves its past

A Distant Horizon and BBC Films production in association with Videovision Entertainment and the Industrial Development Corporation of South Africa Ltd. Produced by Anant Singh, Helena Spring, David M. Thompson and Ruth Caleb. Written by Troy Kennedy Martin and directed by Tom Hooper. 'Red Dust' was shot on location in Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape and in Johannesburg.

A remarkable movie-thriller illustrating the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), 'Red Dust' was greeted with a standing ovation following its South African premiere at the 2005 Cape Town World Cinema Festival.

Following a special preview Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, " 'Red Dust' is a powerful film, so deeply, deeply moving. I was surprised after seeing the production how many in the audience were in tears. We forgot that this was just a film. It reminded us so much and so poignantly of all that we, and so many people of our country, had gone through during the process of the TRC. I just want to congratulate all those involved in this film on a superb job.

"The fact is, it deals with one of the most extra-ordinary events in our world; The Truth and Reconciliation Commission - for the first time a country has opted to air its horrific history, to find a way forward."

When Apartheid ended in South Africa (1990-1994) the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was devised rather like a court; it heard stories of victims of violence, while those who had committed violence could also testify and seek amnesty from prosecution. The idea was to absolve the past and move on, but only by fully acknowledging atrocities of the past.

In director Tom Hooper's 'Red Dust' police officer Dirk Hendricks (Jamie Bartlett) files for amnesty for brutally beating and torturing Alex Mpondo (Chiwetel Enjiofor) for a month.

Since then Mpondo has become an MP, an ascendant politician; now his principal concern is to discover what happened to Steve Sizela (Loyiso Gxwala), arrested at the same time and never seen again - the police claim Sizela was released.

Mpondo's legal counsel is a New York district attorney, Sarah Bascant (Hilary Swank), a South African expat. Years before she was imprisoned overnight for dating a black boy. The whole scenario is complicated for if Hendricks is pushed too far he has information that can kill Mpondo's political career.

The TRC had the virtue of forgiving, but not forgetting, providing of course that people admitted their crimes, otherwise they would still be liable for prosecution and punishment.

Well worth hiring for a few days, 'Red Dust' deals with complex issues. It touches raw nerves and has some harrowing scenes. Nonetheless this drama captures the spirit of reconciliation with characteristic BBC sensitivity.

Related Films

'Long night's journey into day' [Documentary / Co-directed by Frances Reid & Deborah Hoffman - 2000]; Ian Gabriel's 'Forgiveness' [2004]; John Boorman's 'Country of my skull' [2004]; & Ramadan Suleman's 'Zulu love letter' [2004].

BACKGROUND / In theory the TRC was empowered to grant amnesty to those charged with atrocities during Apartheid [1960-1994] as long as two conditions were met : the crimes were politically motivated and the entire and whole truth was told by the person seeking amnesty.

No one was exempt from being charged. As well as ordinary citizens, members of the police could be charged and, most notably, members of the [ANC] African National Congress, the ruling party at the time of the trial, could also be charged.

5392 people were refused amnesty and 849 were granted amnesty, out of 7112 petitioners (there were a number of additional categories, such as *withdrawn*).

The commission brought forth many witnesses giving testimony about the secret and immoral acts committed by the Apartheid Government, the liberation forces including the ANC, and other forces for violence that many say would not have come out into the open otherwise.

On October 28, 1998 the Commission presented its report, which condemned both sides for committing atrocities.

Howard Smith © August 2006

howard smith | 8/120 ngaumutawa rd | masterton 8510 | new zealand | web www.islamey.com
e-mail enigma09@clear.net.nz | tel +64 6 377 5136 | cell 027 636 1902