

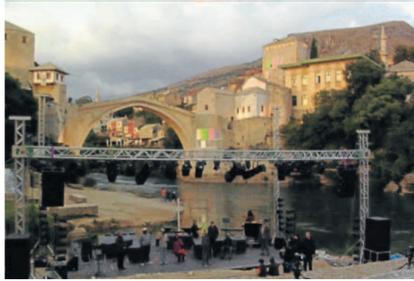


DISCORD: Above left, Fana Mokoena, Bongani Gumed, Quanita Adams and Nick Boraine in the play 'Truth in Translation', directed by Michael Lessac. It has been performed in various former war zones, such as Mostar on the Neretva River, below left, and the Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial and Cemetery to Genocide Victims in Srebrenica, in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Warriors of the most special kind

Michael Lessac's film about the effects of conflict focuses on forgiveness, writes Tymon Smith

At the 35th Durban International Film Festival, which opens next week, you can watch a documentary that is the culmination of more than a decade's investigation into the difficulties of reconciliation and the scars that trauma leaves on the psyche — not only of people in South Africa, but also in Rwanda, Northern Ireland and the Balkans.



'A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake' premieres at the Durban International Film Festival taking place in venues in and around Durban from July 17-27. For more go to durbanfilmfest.co.za

Directed by US theatre, film and television director Michael Lessac, the documentary is a multilayered exploration of issues that began with Lessac's interest in the interpreters who, for two-and-a-half years, translated the pain and anguish of others at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

11 countries, 26 cities, played to 55 000 people and facilitated workshops with 10 000 people. The documentary of this process and its effects — not just on the audiences who watched the play, but also on the troupe of actors who performed it — is called *A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake*, premiering in Durban next week.

The original troupe of South African actors who workshopped the play over three years and form the basis of the documentary included Quanita Adams, Nick Boraine, Andrew Buckland, Sibulele Gellitshana, Bongani Gumed, Fana Mokoena and Thembi Mtshali-Jones. Hugh Masekela composed the music.

The troupe were, in Lessac's eyes, "a very special group of South African actors... who were warriors of the most special kind. They allowed themselves to travel through worlds that were often more painful than their worst nightmares." The difficulties of dealing with the suffering and public cleansing of the commission

process could not just be dealt with on stage and then left behind. This emerges in the documentary and there are moments when the actors, after constantly dealing with issues of reconciliation and differences between people on stage, turn on each other, exposing their everyday prejudices and personalities in their dressing rooms.

Speaking on the phone from the US, Lessac said he never expected this to have happened, having believed that his troupe were "invincible". Perhaps, he said, part of the problem was that he had not considered that the play he and the group had created had "11 people on stage and only the white people were speaking their first language". As a New Yorker, Lessac admits that the notion of forgiveness was "soft" for him. "I thought the idea of a play about it was soft, but once I spoke to the interpreters, I suddenly thought what would happen if people couldn't turn away no matter what they were hearing? How did they survive that channelling of other people's lives with such grace and elegance?" When Lessac and the troupe took *Truth in Translation* to countries that had violent histories without any kind of

truth commission, such as Rwanda, Northern Ireland or the Balkans, he was nervous about the responses of people.

Lessac recalls how he was "surprised" in Rwanda.

"We thought we would be killed by the audience, who would want to know who the hell we thought we were. But it was quite the reverse. In the film, a 15-year-old girl told us about how she is able to forgive the people who killed her whole family, people whom she lives among. We walked out of there speechless."

During workshops with communities in the Balkans, Lessac was "trying to talk about something that happened 20 years ago, and they say you can never understand it unless you understand what happened 800 years ago".

Although the documentary does not provide pat answers or a how-to-forgive guide, it shows the many different ways in which humans deal and sometimes do not deal with histories of violence. Lessac hopes viewers will come away understanding that even with a process such as the truth commission "you can't feel good. It's not that easy and maybe forgiveness and reconciliation are silly words, but they are powerful ones. Whatever you think of the TRC, it was done and you guys are the only ones who ever did it."

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'I was one of the lucky few. Or not. It depends'

A TRC interpreter tells Shelley Seid how she coped with the trauma

NOMUSA Zulu, a social science graduate, was 24 when she applied for a job as an interpreter at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.



HUMILIATED: Nomusa Zulu
Picture: ROGAN WARD

Like most South Africans, she had been following the commission process on TV. She had even attended one of the Durban hearings. It was more than a job application, she said. Her decision was informed by what she believed in, what she held dear, "what I trusted to be right and proper".

The application process was speedy and efficient — a panel interview, an invitation to attend a four-week interpreters' training course, a final selection. "I was one of the lucky few. Or not. It depends how you look at it now."

Zulu's first experience was interpreting at the hearing of a group of Inkatha Freedom Party men who were incarcerated in Durban's Westville Prison for political killings. It was a long hearing. She moved from Durban to Hammarsdale, from Johannesburg to Ermelo.

In Johannesburg, at the Boipatong hearing, she listened to evidence by IFP hostel dwellers who had attacked and slaughtered residents of the township as they slept. In one house, a nine-month-old baby was hacked in the head. At the time of the hearing, she was eight years old and in a wheelchair.

Zulu recalled: "He [the perpetrator] was asked: 'We understand you were attacking people who were your political foes, but why a baby? Why attack a baby?' He replied: 'A snake will give birth to another snake.'"

"I had never felt so humiliated. The victims kept referring to these guys not as IFP but as 'the Zulus'. They would say 'The Zulus came' and to hear someone say that and to know I am associated... I am a Zulu too, I am one of them — how can I be one of these people? That is one moment I will never forget."

According to their code of conduct, interpreters were to maintain a balanced, neutral stance. "It was drilled into us that we were not part of the process, not part of the stories. Our role was to transfer the information so the stories could be heard. But it is very difficult to maintain that kind of detachment."

"Sometimes you would find a person working, interpreting the evidence as it was being said, and he would have tears streaming down his face. That's how bad it was. But you kept on."

Interpreters worked in pairs, sitting in small booths, hidden from public view. The days were long and the work often involved travelling. Staff of the commission received psychological counselling throughout the process. The interpreters, who did not fall under the ambit of the commission, did not. Zulu called it a major weakness.

There were, of course, ways of coping. Zulu exercised to destress, going to the gym

Why attack a baby? He replied: 'A snake will give birth to another snake'

morning and evening. Others found different ways. "We had our moments. We would be in the booth listening to these ghastly stories and someone would press the mute button and crack a joke or just talk nonsense."

"A group of interpreters might sit around after dinner and someone would start talking and laughing and then, before you know it, they would be crying. It had to be that way. The alternative was what? Keep it boiling inside and explode? I don't say I have regrets, but you can't go through that kind of process and be immune to it. I am not sorry for the experience, but the memories, most of them, I'd rather forget."

She now works as the communications officer for the Hibiscus Coast municipality.

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