

Confronting our demons

Michael Lessac's much-anticipated documentary debuts at Diff

ONE of the highlights at this year's Durban International Film Festival (Diff) is the world premiere of *A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake*, the much-anticipated documentary debut of celebrated television/film/theatre director Michael Lessac.

Some of the country's foremost peace mediators are expected to join the director, special guests, and members of the cast and crew for the world screening, which will be followed by a Q&A session.

A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake follows a diverse group of South African actors as they tour global war-torn regions to share their country's experience of reconciliation.

As they ignite dialogue among people with raw memories of atrocity, the actors find they must confront once again their homeland's complicated and violent past — and question their own capacity for healing and forgiveness.

A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake was edited by Joel Plotch (*In the Company of Men*, *Nurse Betty*, *Gone*) and produced by Jacqueline Bertrand Lessac and Emma Tamm. The executive producers are Jonathan Gray, and Robert Lear. The film features never-before-heard original music by jazz legend Hugh Masekela, with lyrics taken from Truth and Reconciliation Commission personal testimonies.

Lessac wanted to better understand the subtleties of South Africa's TRC, and in so doing, bring the story of the commission to a wider audience while exploring the possibility of the TRC as a concept which could successfully be exported to other post-conflict zones.

In 2001, Lessac returned to the Colonnades Theatre Laboratory, which he founded 25 years before in New York City, to find a way of telling the story. He wanted to look beyond the presentations of victim and perpetrator and instead examine the role of the interpreters who translated the TRC proceedings into SA's 11 official languages.

Lessac was intrigued by the fact that the interpreters, simultaneously translating in the first person, could never turn away from atrocity. He met with actual TRC interpreters as they relived their stories and memories for the first time. In 2003, after interviewing over 350 actors in SA, Lessac held a three-week workshop with a core of chosen actors who developed script material out of their own life-experiences intertwined with the lives of the interpreters.

The theatrical vehicle for these conversations was a production entitled *Truth in Translation*, a hard-edged, multi-award winning theatrical production, with accompanying workshops, created between 2003 and 2006. It opened in Rwanda and toured three continents, 11 countries and 26 cities. It has since played to more than 55 000 people and facilitated conflict transformation workshops for more than 10 000 participants.

A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake is the result of this journey — a glimpse into the lives and minds of a group of South African performers who shared and listened; facilitated and re-



Bongani Gumedé, Jeroen Kranenburg and Nick Boraine in a scene from *Truth in Translation*.

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sponded to the heartbreaking real-life personal stories of the human casualties of global conflict.

As South Africans representing various facets of South African society, the actors were forced to look at whether they themselves had even successfully "reconciled" their own individual pasts, and realised just how complex and challenging it is to engage with the multifaceted concept of forgiveness.

"For me, this film pays homage to a very special group of SA actors and interpreters who were warriors of the most special kind. They allowed themselves to travel through worlds that were often more painful than their own worst nightmares," says Lessac.

The documentary's intriguing title refers to a question which often appears in conflict

situations when asked why perpetrators killed young babies. The answer, irrespective of culture is always, one way or another, "A snake gives birth to a snake".

"The film was originally titled *Truth in Translation*, just like the play. We changed it to *A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake* because no matter how true that might be, when revenge is celebrated as heroism, it is a poor excuse for killing," said Lessac.

A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake premieres on July 20 at 5.15 pm at Suncoast Cinemas in Durban. The Durban International Film Festival takes place from July 17 to 27.

For more information, visit: www.durban-filmfest.co.za or e-mail diff@ukzn.ac.za. Follow the festival on twitter: @DIFFest • arts@witness.co.za