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FILM: Durban festival tells the days of our lives

Jul 10, 2014 | Patricia McCracken

Patricia McCracken looks at the line-up at South Africa's largest and longest-running film festival, the Durban International Film Festival

WHEN you're on countdown for the 35th birthday of South Africa's largest and longest-running film festival, the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF), coffee and cigarettes are non-negotiable, says manager Peter Machen. The festival is running from July 17 to July 27.

Last year, a media storm erupted unexpectedly with the Film & Publications Board's infamous initial refusal to certify the gothic horror, teacher-pupil abuse movie *Of Good Report* effectively canceling the festival's opening-night screening. A PG15 certificate was eventually issued just in time to screen the film before the festival closed, and it later went on general release in South Africa, winning awards at festivals across both hemispheres.

This year, DIFF's programmed films, tracking our realities and our fantasies, have already smoothly passed certification and all will be shown, says Machen.

He's been particularly delighted by the rich vein of films for this year's expanded South African documentary section, which explores and interrogates 20 years of the country's democracy.

Acclaimed film maker Khalo Matabane — whose *State Of Violence* opened DIFF 2010 — returns with his provocative documentary, *Nelson Mandela: The Myth and Me*. He is also hosting screenings of 'The Films That Made Me'.

A Snake Gives Birth To A Snake, which features a soundtrack with new music by SA jazz legend Hugh Masekela, shows actors using the Truth and Reconciliation Commission experience in Rwanda, Northern Ireland and the former Yugoslavia to promote reconciliation and self-analysis.

Rainbow Makers looks at the frontline states' contribution to the struggle, while *The King and the People* is a critique of King Mswati III as Africa's last absolute monarch.

"African film is thriving now," says Machen. "This year for the first time DIFF's official competition is dominated by African films. They really hold their own against the rest of the world," he says.

DIFF opens with the world premiere of *Hard To Get*, the feature debut from Zee Ntuli, already acclaimed for his short films. The film combines fast-paced action and visual poetry in classic Hollywood tradition and features Pallance Dladla, a young 'playa' who finds himself played by a beautiful, kick-ass young criminal (Thishiwe Ziqubu), who goes, ominously, by the name of *Skiets*.

Closing DIFF is *Million Dollar Arm*, which plays on the concept that the next great soccer player might come from India. Instead, sports agent J.B. Bernstein — an over-the-hill Jerry Maguire — goes looking for the next baseball-pitching sensation among Mumbai's cricket-crazy youngsters.

In between, DIFF features an eclectic mix of the poignant and eye-popping.

The Congress sees Emmy Award-winning actor Robin Wright (from TV's *House Of Cards*) confronting Hollywood ageism and social-media loss of identity through a surreal mix of psychedelic animation and live action, reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

Indian feature *The Lunchbox* tries to rebalance work and relationship stress through messages sent in Mumbai's tiffin-box service.

Machen recommends "charming" Ethiopian vampire film *Beti And Amare*, made on a budget of just 6,000 Canadian dollars.

Bloody Beans, focusing on children in the Algerian revolution, is one of several features and documentaries looking at popular uprisings. Others include a documentary on Timbuktu after its Islamic occupation; *They Are The Dogs*, about the aftermath of Morocco's Arab Spring; *Die Welt*, set after Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution; and '71, which depicts the early years of Northern Ireland's troubles.

DIFF features more than 250 screenings at nine venues around Durban and beyond — including the Luthuli Museum in KwaDukuza and eKhaya Multi Arts Centre in KwaMashu — plus free public screenings, some at the beach, sponsored by the British Council.

Wavescapes' festival-within-a-festival returns for a fifth year. Its selection of films include Latina feminist surfing in 3 Killas *Y Un Kiwi* and the simply titled *Russia*, which takes place on remote waves on the Pacific rim and elsewhere.

Gender and sexuality is another area of focus, while selected architecture movies are being shown to coincide with the 25th World Congress on Architecture, held in the city.

Wild Talk Africa again contributes wildlife and environmental documentaries, including snake movie *Black Mamba* and *Unearthed*, Jolynn Minnaar's timely and award-winning look at the implications of fracking.

DIFF's partnership with Cape Town's Encounters Film Festival also brings the likes of Abby Ginzberg's *Soft Vengeance: Albie Sachs and the New South Africa*, undercut perhaps by Rehad Desai's searing account *Marikana, Miners Shot Down*.

Go to www.durbanfilmfest.co.za to download the programme and film catalogue; follow DIFF on Twitter: @DIFFest; on Facebook: DurbanInternationalFilmFestival. Also look at: www.wavescapesfestival.com; www.connectza.tumblr.com/about; www.wildtalkafrica.com; and www.uia2014durban.org

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