

# Review

## *Tsotsi as social commentary*

Directed by Gavin Hood, screenplay based on an Athol Fugard novel

Oscar: Best Foreign Film

Reviewed by Sarah Motsoetsa

**T**sotsi (criminal in township lingo), is not just a story about a tsotsi from 'ekasi' (South African township) but could easily be a story of a thug anywhere. A tsotsi from Mombasa, Kenya or Brooklyn, USA would all fit the character. 'Botsotsi' (tsotsis) all over the world could identify with the characters, so too could their victims and those who live in the midst of botsotsi. Similarities in challenges faced by workers and the poor globally are brought into focus through the characters in this movie.

Yet regardless of how universal the story is, for many of us who come from the townships, *Tsotsi* represents the many untold stories about the reality of township life in present day South Africa.

I went to *Tsotsi* to watch an interpretation of township life with mixed emotions but an open mind. I was met unexpectedly by a cultural novelty. *Tsotsi* is one amongst a million movies that immerses you in the story. I didn't have to read long subtitles. I understood the cultural context which is so important to understanding the characters and which allows relaxed enjoyment of the movie itself.

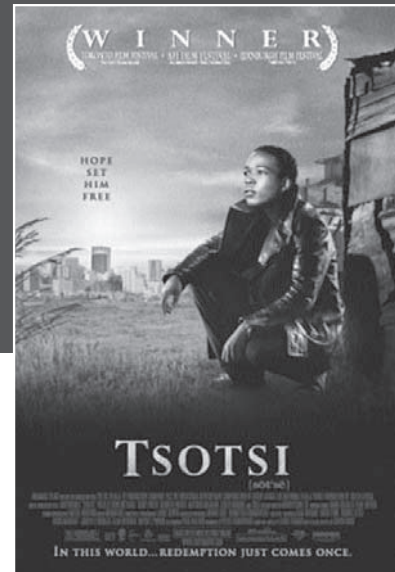
The familiarity with the language allowed me to understand the subtle humour so elegantly presented in the movie. It was amazing to watch a movie whose setting I was familiar with. I didn't know the *actual* location but I could easily identify with it. I have

seen it so many times, lived in it. It is not 'chaos' as the naïve policeman describes it in the movie. Without romanticising daily township struggles, this is the reality of the place called home for so many of us.

The movie's social commentary is also profound. It opens up a new race-class debate and exposes the realities of post-apartheid South Africa. Some movies have depicted whites alone as being victims of car hijackings. While this is often the case, *Tsotsi* confronts such racial stereotypes. This is not done just to dispel stereotypes but to reflect on South Africa's economic transformation and how this has changed the notion of crime based on race.

Most whites during apartheid were not hijacked because of their race but rather because of their class location. In the movie it is a black woman who is hijacked not because of her race, but rather because of her class location. Put crudely, she can unlike before, afford to drive an expensive car and live in the suburbs of Johannesburg, and that makes her a more likely victim of hijack.

Of course there are few blacks like her who have made such economic gains. The movie clearly shows the millions that still live in squalor who are themselves victims of crime and also of poverty and lack of service delivery. It shows that while some blacks drive expensive cars, most use overcrowded trains; while some live



in suburbia with 24 hour armed security and electric fences, most stand in water queues and live in shacks with no electricity.

Racism still prevails in post-apartheid Africa, 11 years into democracy, and continues to shape the way we think and act in our society, but the movie is most insightful on the class issue. The poverty and inequality experienced by the majority is juxtaposed to the upward mobility of the few. These contradictions come through powerfully in the movie.

Undeniably, South African movies are making huge strides internationally. They are fast becoming one of our export commodities. We produced the acclaimed *Yesterday*, and now *Tsotsi*. Both we should be proud of. That said, we need to be careful of exporting South African stories that perpetuate misguided stereotypes of a country riddled with crime and HIV/AIDS. While these are daily struggles, they are not our only reality. South Africa is a beautiful country with many beautiful stories still to share with the world, if it dares to listen.

LB

*Sarah Motsoetsa is a researcher in the Sociology of Work Programme (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand.*

# A JOURNEY WALKER

by Thobile Maso

*Growing, crawling and born he was below the mountain valley  
Carried by body of his thin strong legs  
Here he came, walking forward on his cold warm feet  
Eyes looking way back searching for tomorrow*

*A journey walker!*

*Watching orange sun ready to set beyond the hills  
Deep down the quiet hidden night  
Smelling ocean tides hoofing like ending sound of thunder  
Man can grow as tall no matter how*

*A journey walker!*

*Rough the world is  
Rocky his mountain to climb on  
When the waves of life begin to wave  
Birth of a new day as a blessing of human social life*

*A journey walker!*

*From long swim to valley of agony and cruelty  
Climbing his own steep high mountain  
A mountain of kind ones and dangerous species  
A mountain of wars and peaceful humans  
A world of holiness and drug dealers  
A world of freedom and fiefdom of kings  
A world of exploiters and freedom fighters  
This is a dynamic world he lives in*

*A journey walker!*

This poem is dedicated to our father Madiba



3<sup>rd</sup> floor, COSATU house,  
1 Leyds street ,Braamfontein  
P.o Box 1027, Johannesburg 2000



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