

Where credit is due

Brian Paseka Letlhabane

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The Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) recently acknowledged Kali van der Merwe's dedication and talent as a documentary filmmaker when they honoured her with the Best South African Documentary Award. van der Merwe's documentary, *Brown*, looks at the life of Ernestine Deane, a Cape Town singer and songwriter as she embarks on an odyssey into her heritage.

In the 1960s, Deane's grandparents were evicted from their farm in Constantia and relocated to the urban suburb of Grassy Park, thanks to the infamous Group Areas Act. Deane's grandparents continued to yearn for their tract of land that remained fallow and unused in one of Cape Town's most exclusive suburbs. Their return visit later unleashed the suppressed emotion resulting from years of marginalisation and loss.

"I see it as a glimpse into a particular time. It acknowledges the past and uses it to help us understand the future," said van der Merwe who runs her organisation, Otherwise Media from Cape Town.

Before winning the DIFF Award in June, *Brown* had already won first prize in the African Documentary section of the 15th African, Asian and Latin American Film Festival in Italy, March 2005. At last year's Cape Town International Film Festival, *Brown* also managed to get a screening.

However, *Brown* is not Van der Merwe's first documentary to look at the life of a woman. Her last documentary, *Doing It*, which also competed at last year's DIFF, explored the issues around female sexuality. It was screened on SABC1 for two consecutive years to commemorate National Women's Day. It went on to win an audience prize at the Cinema delle Donne Film Festival, Turin, Italy, the Jury Award at the Ismailia Film Festival, Egypt as well as a Golden Stone award in South Africa from the National Television and Video Association (NTVA). Furthermore, *Doing It* is currently being transformed into a book soon to be published by Jacana Press.

"I like telling stories about women who have managed to survive something challenging," says van der Merwe "I like to involve people in the filming process, to give them a chance to explore the medium. On my last documentary, *Doing It*, I gave the subjects of the documentary a chance to contribute with their own ideas to the story. I don't just want to take stuff away from them, without them having learned something they can use to improve their lives."

While van der Merwe has confessed her passion for untold stories, she said it sometimes takes her two to three years to complete a documentary. "It's passion more than anything else. I don't always make enough money from my documentaries and would not advise anyone to make a documentary if they intend to make money," she said with humour. However, apart from the money, van der Merwe says seeing her work being used in public libraries, schools and at workshops is a very rewarding feeling. "My work is often used to raise awareness, and stimulate debate about social issues.

van der Merwe might not have gone to film school but she is academically armed with a Bachelor's Degree in Sculpture from the University of Cape Town. "I'm happy I didn't go to film school, in that way I get to rely on my own instincts. I have nothing against film schools, but I think formal school tends to impose rules and ways of working. But then again, the technical knowledge offered by many film schools is very essential."