

# Forced removals from Constantia revived in film

by Julia Landau

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In *Brown*, the latest documentary from award winning local filmmaker Kali van der Merwe, she has devised a gender-orientated film aesthetic; the form she employs accurately encases and reflects the content. Funded by the Open Society Foundation for South Africa, this independently produced film, to be screened on SABC 1 in March, considers topics which include forced removals, women and creativity and birth.

van der Merwe is also the Director of the NGO Other-Wise Media which produces work intended to raise viewer's awareness and imparts skills to marginalised youth with an emphasis on women. Perhaps her background in Fine Arts enabled her to imbue *Brown* with its sensitive, artistic interpretations.

Asked about her inspiration for the documentary, she responds, "early one morning Ernestine Deane, singer with the well known group Moodphase5ive, phoned to ask me if I would like to make a film about her grandfather, Chris Pietersen and the forced removals from Constantia. I suggested that she should also be part of the project. She represents the new generation of South Africans who experienced the tail end of apartheid." The fact that Deane became pregnant before filming began, gives the movie even more impetus because one is constantly aware that the exchanges in the film exist within a broader context: that of the future symbolised by the impending birth.

van der Merwe has the ability to capture intensely private moments without being intrusive. She manages to record everyday heated dialogue, such as that in which Deane explains why she wants to sing the last of her song in a certain fashion and that between the band members, which adds to the overall impact. Deane is comfortable with herself and her pregnancy. Director and producer, van der Merwe concentrates on Deane's stomach in many of the shots, visually commenting on the birth.

"When Ernie became pregnant, I thought, 'great, let's put that into the documentary too. It will be a wonderful vehicle to tell the story,' comments van der Merwe. "There is an urgency about pregnancy, the deadline of the birth is always looming and gives the story pace. There are very extraordinarily visibly bodily changes that take place. The pregnancy also gave us a perfect reason for Ernie to explore her family history because she was contemplating the bequest she would give to her child."

Ernie and her grandfather have a close and beautiful relationship. She asks all the questions that so many people often intend to ask their elders whilst they are still on this earth but unfortunately frequently, never get around to. Watching the pair chat, and later looking into

her grandpa's emotional eyes as he returns to the land from which he was evicted, might inspire people to re visit their own history and fill in the names and experiences of otherwise unknown family members who forlorn and forgotten, are relegated to the pages of dusty photograph albums.

“My documentaries are very personal in that they are about subjects and topics I am interested in exploring in my own life. So although I am telling someone else's story, my story is there too, gently threaded into the fabric. Most of my documentaries focus on women because I feel the exploration of the inner life of women is still absent from the media.”

In Ernie's chats to relatives and friends and through her songs, she touches on a chapter of apartheid that shaped the lives of so many of the older generation and from which the majority never actually recovered. Even though it is painful for Mr. Pietersen to visit the land which he nurtured and of which he and his family were cruelly dispossessed, he seems somehow freer and in a more expansive state than in the little room in Grassy Park where he recollects his past in response to Ernie's queries. It is horrifying to think that the huge expensive houses and the vast expanses of land that black South Africans owned will never again be theirs. Dumped in the wastelands of Cape Town, one of their most priceless legacies is their memory.

van der Merwe remarks, “I was not aware that forced removals had taken place from Constantia. It is a heart breaking story. Deane's family, like so many others who lived in Constantia were rooted to the land they farmed. Ellen Deane, Ernie's mother was 13 when the family was forcibly removed. To this day Mr. Pietersen says he doesn't feel at home in Grassy Park even though he has lived there for 40 years now. I also wanted to show resilience and creativity in the face of adversity. Each person in Ernie's family found a way to make a little haven for themselves in bleak, urbanised Grassy Park. Ellen is cultivating a garden which is a refuge for the chameleons she recalls from her childhood.”

The portrait painted of this vocalist, the imminent arrival of her baby and her conversations are a compelling mix. Nowadays, people invariably want to block out the voices of former days and concentrate on something more pleasant. van der Merwe and Deane took it upon themselves to ensure that their words were heard. And what better way to welcome a member of the human race than the preservation of ancestral voices.