

WOMEN

FILMMAKERS

We need a whole new generation of black filmmakers to tell their own stories and other stories to redress this imbalance in perspective and I think this is starting to happen. We have an enormous injustice to correct in this country. But ultimately I think anyone can tell any story they want to. What really counts is how well you tell that story, writes Akiedah Mohamed

FORCED REMOVALS

Kali van der Merwe does not consider herself exclusively a filmmaker because she does not only make her living as one. Money comes in through her art: photography, graphic design, installations for theatre, experimental videos and media training. Yet this self-taught filmmaker, who describes herself as being on the fringes of the film industry, makes a film called **BROWN** and lands smack bang in the middle of the award pudding that so many filmmakers aspire to. A local award confirms that a film resonates with its intended audience and an international award says that the filmmaker can tell a universal story that touches the hearts of people in other cultures.

Internationally she won **BEST AFRICAN DOCUMENTARY** at the 15th African, Asian, Latin American film festival in Milan, Italy. Locally she won **BEST DOCUMENTARY** at the Apollo Film Festival. The 26th Durban International Film Festival Jury described her film **BROWN** as; "A lavishing and dynamic musical and visual composition," which "proves to be an intriguing document of self-discovery that confronts a moment in SA history in an attempt to understand the destiny of future generations." They awarded her **BEST SOUTH AFRICAN DOCUMENTARY** to prove it. Ironically on all occasions, Kali was not present to receive her awards. She says "With all three awards I was informed via e-mail that the film had won, so there are no grand pictures with me award in hand, no acceptance speeches. But the honor and acknowledgement is there." What is this film about? Kali explains that she received a call from the singer, Ernie Dean, who asked her if she wanted to make a film about her grandfather, who had been forcibly removed from Constantia. Ernie was

concerned that he was getting on in years and needed to tell his story. "I was immediately interested in making the film as most people don't actually know that forced removals took place in up-market Constantia, which has almost no trace of its former inhabitants. I suggested to Ernie that we put her in the film as well to explore the story into the present generation." Intrigued by the chronicles of forced removals from Constantia, which Kali acknowledges is "an important story to be told even though **BROWN** only picks at the scab of the wound..." provided her with many insights. "I learnt how land and identity can be so deeply combined; the loss of one is the loss of the other. This is how colonialism and apartheid effectively destroyed people's sense of themselves through removing them from their land."

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As in most filmmaking situations the money needed to make a film always presents a trial and tribulation scenario. In Kali's case, she submitted her idea to SABC 1 to fit in with the musical portrait series slot. The SABC liked her proposal, and decided to commission the project.

Many filmmakers would tell you that they've had to put their hands in their own pockets because if they wait for the contract and the money to arrive, they're not likely to finish the film in time for broadcast. I love this part of the interview because we're talking survival, and how filmmakers creatively solve their dilemmas. ▽



"THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR ME IS TO TRUST MY INSTINCTS AND THE LESS DEBRIS ON THAT ROAD THE BETTER."



© Yasir Bookey

Kali explains that she felt the pressure especially since we had a tight shooting schedule as Ernie was already 5 months into her pregnancy which gave us a limited period in which to film. No contract or finances were forthcoming from the SABC and I realised I was in serious financial trouble having personally carried the cost of everything up to that point. That is when I earnestly started searching for finances elsewhere. Luckily the Open Society Foundation for South Africa felt the film was a worthwhile endeavor, covering a topic that fitted in with their mandate and they financed most of the documentary. We eventually negotiated a pre-license agreement with the SABC but this was signed only just before it was about to be broadcast!

"Pregnancy holds a huge fascination for me. Making the film with pregnant Ernie brought it a little more down to earth as she went through the mood swings and the fatigue of that state of being. But what I really wanted to get across was the mystery and miracle of the female body in her nurturing, and 'alive with possibility' state. In the documentary her pregnancy represents hope for the future."

One cannot help but be moved by the subject matter of the film *BROWN*, because so many families' personal histories are saturated with stories of forced removals. For most people, dispossession is overshadowed by the present and is given only a brief mention; we approach the subject by knocking on its door, but we stand outside never daring to enter its space of pain.

In the world of filmmaking, the debate has often raged about who has the right to tell whose stories. I asked Kali, if she ever encountered criticism in making the film *BROWN* as a white woman. "I think the questioning around who can tell whose story is a very necessary debate in this country.

For so long white people have told the stories of black people, re-inventing history to suit their perspectives."

As a self-taught filmmaker, with a degree in Fine Arts majoring in sculpture, Kali explains that she is forced to rely on her gut feelings and instinct when making a film as she has no formal training and there is no right or wrong in creativity. "The most important thing for me is to trust my instincts and the less debris on that road the better." Her passion for telling stories of people whose voices and faces are absent from the media, sees her focusing on women's stories, because "I am a woman and so I feel I can tell the stories from the inside out. Society is shifting and women now have an enormous role to play in shaping this world into something different from what we have known." Kali directs an organisation called Other-Wise media which works in a participatory way, teaching skills to youth and women while making innovative, awareness-raising media.

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Asked whether she has any pearls of wisdom for other filmmakers, she replies: "Go out and do. Don't think you need to go to an expensive film school before you can make a film. These days the technology to make films is fairly cheaply available. If you can't get your own equipment beg, borrow and shoot." Wise words coming from a woman who says: "I am 41 years old, a magical age where you start to become yourself more fully because you care less about what other people think." Well Kali, judging from all those awards people think a lot about your work. ■