

URUCU PRESENTS



THE WOUND

A FILM BY JOHN TRENGOVE



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SYNOPSIS

Xolani, a lonely factory worker, joins the men of his community in the mountains of the Eastern Cape to initiate a group of teenage boys into manhood. When a defiant initiate from the city discovers his best kept secret, Xolani's entire existence begins to unravel.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The Wound was born out of a desire to push back against clichéd stereotypes of black masculinity perpetuated inside and outside of African cinema. As a white man, representing marginalized black realities that are not my own, the situation is of course complicated.

Even highly problematic. It was important to me that the story mirrors this problem. The character of Kwanda is an outsider to the traditional world who expresses more or less my own ideas about human rights and individual freedom. He's also the problem. His preconceptions create jeopardy and crisis for others who have much more to lose than him. This was my way of saying, "I don't have the answers and my own values don't necessarily apply here". A film such as this cannot hope to provide solutions for the crisis faced by millions of queer people in the African continent and around the world, only to present the crisis for what it is, a deep and ever widening chasm. In writing *The Wound*, inspiration came, unexpectedly, from Robert Mugabe. Statements that he and other African leaders have made since the early 90's imply that homosexuality is a symptom of western decadence that threatens "traditional" culture. And so we thought ok, let's use that idea. Let's imagine "gayness" as some kind of virus that penetrates and threatens a patriarchal organism, and let's see how that organism responds to being penetrated.

John Trengove



UKWALUKA

Ukwaluka is a traditional initiation into manhood that is widely practiced by the Xhosa people of South Africa. Twice a year, groups of initiates in their late adolescence leave their communities to live in secluded camps where they are ritually circumcized. For several weeks, initiates are nursed and mentored by young men from their communities (khankathas) after which they return home to assume the privileges and responsibilities of adult men. Increasingly, the practice faces mounting criticism for reasons of safety and relevance, although it remains a cornerstone of traditional Xhosa culture and is considered the defining event of a man's life. While Xhosa men are forbidden to speak openly of their experience of Ukwalukha, Nelson Mandela famously broke the secrecy taboo by describing his initiation in his autobiography, *Long Walk To Freedom*. The ritual is also the subject of *The Wound* co-writer Thando Mggqolozana's debut novel, *A Man Who Is Not A Man*.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JOHN TRENGOVE

What drew you to the subject matter?

I was interested in what happens when groups of men come together and organize themselves outside of society and the codes of their everyday lives. I wanted to show the intense emotional and physical exchanges that are possible in these spaces and how repressing strong feelings leads to a kind of toxicity and violence. As an outsider to this culture, it was important that I approach this story from the perspective of characters who are themselves outsiders, who struggle to conform to the status quo that they are a part of.

*What was the process of writing *The Wound*?*

We started with a lot of research. Spent time in the Eastern Cape which is where the ritual is mostly practiced. We listened to many testimonials and conversations with Xhosa men who had been through the ritual. Gay men, straight men, some urbanized and affluent, others from remote rural areas. These stories sparked our earliest ideas about the narrative. Researching the ritual brought up conflicting feelings in me. You hear stories about how it can be a breeding ground for homophobic and hyper-masculine behaviour. At the same time I got to see first hand the transformative effect it had on some men who went through it. In a world that is under-fathered, there is something profound about a ritual that shows a young boy his place in the world of men.

How do you navigate the politics of being a white filmmaker depicting marginal characters with realities different than your own?

As much as possible I tried to disrupt my own preconceptions. Like most middle-class audiences who watch the film, it would be easy for me to look at Xolani and say, here is a gay character who is repressed and deserves to be emancipated from his oppressive community and express himself as an individual. I resisted those kinds of resolutions for his character and tried instead to present his problem for what it is, which is big and difficult, without clear answers. The character of Kwanda comes closest to expressing those values, but he's also the problem. His preconceptions create jeopardy and crisis for others who have



much more to lose than him. This was my way of saying, “I don’t have the answers and my own values don’t necessarily apply here”.

Given the controversy of the ritual in South Africa, how do you think it will be received?

Ukwaluka is a taboo ritual and representing it in the way we have is contentious. We knew from the start that we’d spark strong reactions from traditionalists. But there was also a lot of encouragement from a younger Xhosa generation who seems eager to break the silence around the initiation which is seen to perpetuate some of the dangers associated with it. It’s a vast and very nuanced practice and there remains a lot to be said about the ritual that is not my place to talk about. Things that need to be said from within the culture. Hopefully *The Wound* could spark some of that. Maybe a gay Xhosa kid will look at it one day and go, actually, that wasn’t my experience at all, and be inspired to write his own story.



How did you come to work with Thando Mgqolozana?

I approached Thando when I read his first novel *A Man Who Is Not A Man*, which deals with the initiation. Meeting him was a turning point because he clearly got what I was trying to do. I don't think he was necessarily interested in working on a project about the initiation again, but he responded strongly to the idea of depicting alternative African masculinities. Thando wrote his own version of the treatment, filtering my ideas through his own experiences and opening up narrative possibilities within the frame of the ritual. We also collaborated on a short film, *The Goat*, based on a chapter from his novel.

Can you describe your process on set?

We had a few rules that were there to help us stay connected to the truth. All the roles including speaking extras had to be first language Xhosa men who had their own first-hand experience of the

ritual. The only exception to this was Niza Jay Ncoyini who plays Kwanda, which made sense because his character challenges and defies the ritual. The larger community of Xhosa men and elders in the film are all non-actors. We asked them to perform the different aspects of the ritual as they would do it, and to react to the rehearsed scenarios in any way they felt was right. If they didn't approve of a character's behaviour, they would say so during takes. Sometimes we wouldn't call cut and scenes would just carry on and we'd be rolling as these men were offering up the most incredible material, completely unscripted. Bongile Mantsai who played Vija is a very experienced theatre actor, was particularly good at encouraging this free flow interaction with the group. It was very exciting to watch and it really kept us on our toes. We shot the group scenes chronologically, in the order that they would happen in the ritual.

On working with Nakhane Touré

I met Nakhane about 2 years ago and I was instantly a fan. I secretly started writing the lead character for him after our first meeting. Even though he didn't have any professional acting experience I had a feeling that he would be hypnotic on camera. Nakhane is a fearless and multifaceted artist in his own right and understands intrinsically that you have to put yourself outside your comfort zone to do interesting work. He does this instinctively without blocking or resisting and allows himself to be very vulnerable and honest in front of the camera. It's very rare to work with an actor like that.

Can you speak about your collaboration with Urucu Media?

Until recently there was a shortage of South African film producers willing to take risks on non-formulaic projects. When I joined forces with Elias Ribeiro at Urucu Media, the first thing we decided was that this is exactly the niche the company would occupy. We wanted to create a space for films like *The Wound*, to encourage original voices in local cinema that could hopefully also reach an international audience. People thought we were crazy when we started developing this film, but Elias's incredible optimism and ability to embrace less conventional ways of financing, particularly international co-production, meant that it finally got made. Today we are seeing more daring films coming out of South Africa, and I like to think Urucu has been a significant part of that shift.

CAST

Xolani **NAKHANE TOURÉ**
Vija **BONGILE MANTSAI**
Kwanda **NIZA JAY NCOYINI**
Babalo **THOBANI MSELENI**
Initiates **GAMELIHLE BOVANA**
HALALISANI BRADLEY CEBEKHULU
INGA QWEDE
SIBABALWE NGQAYANA
SIPHOSETHU NGCETANE

CREW

Director **JOHN TRENGOVE**
Writers **JOHN TRENGOVE**
THANDO MGQOLOZANA
MALUSI BENGU
Director of Photography **PAUL ÖZGÜR**
Production Designers **BOBBY CARDOSO**
SOLLY SITHOLE
Costume Designer **LEHASA MOLLOYI**
Makeup Artists **SMARTIE OLIFANT**
MTHOKOZISI NHLAPO
Casting Director **CAIT PANSEGROUW**
Editor **MATTHEW SWANEPOEL**
Sound Designer **MATTHEW JAMES**
Composer **JOÃO ORECCHIA**

Producers
ELIAS RIBEIRO & CAIT PANSEGROUW / URUCU MEDIA

Co-Producers
MICHAEL ECKELT / RIVA FILMPRODUKTION
CLAUDIA TRONNIER / DAS KLEINE FERNSEHSPIEL
OLAF GRUNERT / ARTE/ZDF
TRENT / OAK MOTION PICTURES
BATANA VUNDLA / COOL TAKE PICTURES
MARIE DUBAS / DEUXIÈME LIGNE FILMS
ERIC LAGESSE / SAMPEK PRODUCTIONS
BJÖRN KOLL / EDITION SALZGEBER
BIANCA ISAAC / FIGJAM ENTERTAINMENT

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