

FILM REVIEW

Jahmil X.T. Qubeka, director. *Sew the Winter to My Skin*. 2018. 132 minutes. Afrikaans, Xhosa, and English, with no subtitles. Somerset East and Cookhouse, South Africa. Die Gesellschaft DGS, Yellowbone Entertainment. Price depends on subscription service. Available on Amazon Prime, Netflix, and Showmax streaming services.

Director Jahmil X.T. Qubeka is a talented auteur in the South African film industry, despite his debut feature film *Of Good Report* (2013) falling victim to a misguided censorious move by South Africa's Film and Publications Board (FPB). The FPB refused the film certification shortly before its screening at the Durban International Film Festival, later citing a baseless allegation of child pornography. The film was unbanned, and Qubeka's film—as well as his preferences for stylistic innovations and departures from mainstream cinematic storytelling—reached considerable levels of public salience. As Cara Moyer-Duncan (“*Knuckle City Review*” [*African Studies Review* 65 (3): E65–67]) writes in her review of Qubeka's *noir* boxing drama *Knuckle City* (2019), both that film and *Of Good Report* “have a circular narrative structure connecting the past to the present, employ elements of *film noir*, and feature men who are emblematic of toxic masculinity, which is clearly a preoccupation of Qubeka's.”

To a great extent, these formal concerns and a preoccupation with toxic masculinity as rooted in particular political periods and ideological frameworks remain present in the South African-German coproduction *Sew the Winter to My Skin* (2018), a visually poetic, sumptuous, and languorous historical drama with Western-genre influences. I was amused but not surprised to see the film described as a “rousing epic” on a number of popular websites, as these adjectives promise the kind of action-adventure that generally results in a pleasurable cathartic climax. This is not the kind of film Qubeka was interested in making. *Sew the Winter to My Skin* is almost completely devoid of dialogue, and evokes not only Sergio Leone but also, as per Qubeka's own director's notes (Daniel Dercksen, “*Sew the Winter to My Skin: A South African Western-style Epic*” [in *The Writer's Studio* 2019]), French imagist Jean-Jacques Annaud, and American Western-auteur John Ford. Qubeka may not have Death Valley as part of his iconography, but

Somerset East and surrounds make for equally visually powerful settings, many of which form the backdrop for prolonged scenes of apartheid-era violence and oppression.


With this film, Qubeka's interest is less in detailed period spectacle and more in how four men navigate different social roles and positions in apartheid South Africa. *Sew the Winter to My Skin* is an explicit condemnation of apartheid; it articulates the damages these four men and their communities suffer as a result of a dehumanizing and socio-economically and psychologically destructive system. The film seems to center on famed Somerset East-based cattle thief John Kepe (Ezra Mabengeza), whom a white journalist at one point calls "the Samson of the Boschberg" in reference to the mythical status Kepe attained in the Eastern Cape. While Kepe is presumed to be the narrative anchor of the film, the reality is quite different; besides Kepe, the film spends much time in apartheid policeman Botha's (Peter Kurth) world, as well as that of journalist Simon Potgieter (Bok van Blerk). Finally, the film features an enigmatic character in the form of the black apartheid enforcer identified in the credits as Black Wyatt Earp (Zolisa Xaluva). This character is inscrutable in that his support of Botha, as well as his disdain for his own community, is never explained.

Maybe the lack of clarity around this enforcer figure, and even about Potgieter's sometimes tonally adrift presence, is partly explained by the impression that *Sew the Winter to My Skin* is not an actors' film. Rather, it is a film in which performers' bodies seem at most to be vital visual components of the mise-en-scene, as complemented by Johnathan Kovel's camerawork, Layla Swart's pinpoint editing, and Braam du Toit's evocative score, all in service of the image. As such, *Sew the Winter to My Skin* is a film for and about presences, for bodies walking, running, whipping and being whipped, burning, being shot, and crawling.

In addition, the casting of Afrikaans singer and sometimes actor Bok van Blerk as the sympathetic Potgieter comes with some political baggage. Here to observe and justly document the death sentence of the infamous Somerset East cattle thief, Van Blerk's presence cannot but evoke the nostalgic and conservative associations of his songs "De La Rey" and "Die Land" ("The Land"), as well as his earlier film work in another South African pseudo-Western about land ownership, *Platteland* (Sean Else, 2011), in which he co-starred with controversial Afrikaans artist and self-styled political pundit Steve Hofmeyr.

Replete with images of the apartheid-era national flag and swastikas, and therefore occasionally tonally reminiscent of Jason Xenopoulos' flawed adaptation of Karel Schoeman's anti-apartheid novel *Promised Land* (2002), *Sew the Winter to My Skin* cements Qubeka as one of SA cinema's strongest imagists. At one point, Qubeka seems to be in direct conversation with white filmmakers filming black bodies in apartheid South Africa when he cites comedy filmmaker Jamie Uys (*The Gods Must Be Crazy; Funny People*) in a scene with a motorcycle driver swallowing a bug. However, this event and what follows come across as tonally jarring slapstick in a film that is mostly rather

hefty and severe with self-importance. In the end, the film's visceral potency cannot compensate for its overall narrative incoherence, as, for instance, the mythical figure Kepe remains little more than a myth in service of an image.

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