

# Reliving the 'Drum' years

At the height of apartheid in the 50s and 60s, a small magazine in Joburg dared to explore the rich but hidden contours of black South African life. **Tymon Smith** speaks to Zola Maseko, director of 'Drum', a US-South African co-production that aims to revive the era for an international audience of moviegoers

**T**HE skies are grey and the roads are wet as I step out of the taxi in front of Zola Maseko's apartment in the east of Johannesburg. The garage door opens to reveal the man himself, dressed from head to toe in black, standing next

to his black car.

I follow Maseko up to his infamous loft, a huge converted factory space. On the pillars and walls are various photographs: here is Bob Marley, over there Marley and Mick Jagger share a laugh and behind the table where we sit, a large collage of photos of Maseko and various people, some of whom I pretend not to recognise.

I ask him about the collage, "It's my life story man, I just keep on adding to it," he says as we sit down to begin the process of unpacking some of the director's thoughts on his first feature film, the South African film industry and the country at large.

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He has directed a number of award-winning short films and documentaries including *The Foreigner* and *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*.

In November and December last year, Maseko completed shooting on his first feature, *Drum*, a film about renowned 50s journalist Henry Nxumalo, set against the backdrop of Sophiatown.

Maseko was still in exile when he first became interested in Sophiatown in 1990. It was a revelation to him: "... it was like, 'Fuck! Wow! you know? From there it was set for me. Shit, there was a time and a place like this in South Africa! I just found it fascinating and the more I read and researched about it, the more it grew."

He read everything he could get his hands on, interviewed Hugh Masekela and other musicians of the 50s in London and always kept in the back of his mind the idea that one day he'd like to make a film about this fascinating period.

Upon his return to South Africa, he wrote a six-part television series for "our infamous SABC", called *Short Stories from Sophiatown*.

Thinking that he had put his "obsession with Sophiatown to rest", Maseko waited for his chance to see his efforts realised on film, but the "SABC not being interested in South African stories, dilly-dallying, I had thoughts of, 'I'm going to be stuck here till I die', so I pulled one story out and that became *Mr Drum*".

It was not just simply a question of changing one of the stories for the purposes of writing a feature, though. He had to find a character to tell the story of a time and a place.

"So I thought, get a journalist who wrote about boxing, shebeen queens, music, politics, farms, prisons ... and Henry Nxumalo was the greatest *Drum* journalist, one of the greatest journalists South Africa ever produced — investigative journalists.

"Here is the person who not only embodies what Sophiatown was but is also the best lead into telling the



**KOFIFI DAYS:** Top, Zola Maseko gives Taye Diggs direction on the set of *Drum*. Above, the cast recreate an iconic image from Sophiatown. The film will be released internationally in August.

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story of Sophiatown."

Having decided upon a character, Maseko set about writing the script. He did more research, interviewed *Drum* magazine's founder Jim Bailey — "a fascinating man, and he was very generous with his information and just opened up stories about characters and threw open the Bailey Archives" — and by 1998 he had a finished script with which he went hunting for funding.

The process of finding investors was gruelling.

"I had been trying to raise money for this film since 1994 and I'd been to everyone — everyone in South Africa, all the leading financial institutions, the black bourgeoisie — and nobody was interested in funding this film.

"As a last resort I went to America in 1996 and I thought, 'Fuck this, I don't wanna do this Hollywood shit'.

"I tried England, I tried Germany

and again in 2002, I had to go back and knock on Hollywood's door. Hollywood was a last resort."

Maseko finally found his funders in Armada Pictures, a distribution company who put up 60 percent of the foreign funding for the film. Local funding was provided by the National Film and Video Foundation, The Industrial Development Corporation and Sasaki.

**F**oreign funding may have provided the opportunity for Maseko to realise his dream of bringing *Drum* to the screen but it was not unconditional.

"I thought, 'Tell a good story, tell a small story, a genuinely South African story.' When the Americans came in they said, 'No! Fuck that! We're not

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going with a first-time South African director and an unknown South African cast! So the first thing they said was 'We have to have a known cast'.

There has been particular scepticism among local gossips regarding the casting of Taye Diggs in the lead role but Maseko maintains that "the fact that, at the end of the day, it was only Henry who went to a foreigner, that was a real big fight from my side. Having said that, I think Taye Diggs did a good job."

The cast is predominantly composed of local actors including Tumisho Mafiso, Moshidi Motshegwa, Fezile Mpela, Keketso Semoko and Zola.

With the money finally secured and the script polished, production on *Drum* began in earnest last year. The mostly local crew was augmented by some American assistance, notably that of cinematographer Lisa Rinzier.

I first came across the happy bunch just before shooting commenced towards the end of last year in a bustling restaurant.

Did their experience help put the director at ease? "Definitely" — they made him feel safe and they were a great crew who believed in the story.

"Lisa doesn't do just anything. She's been offered huge-budget Hollywood films but believes that if she's going to

put her heart and soul into something, she has to believe it. So she's refused lots of blockbuster shit because of her belief."

"So the story really attracted a great crew who know about South Africa and the historical fuck-ups we've had in this country and they came with 'Let's go and play our part in South Africa' that's what they came here to do and it was incredible."

A great crew, a good story, how hard could the actual shoot be?

Maseko shakes his head: "No man, the shoot was really hectic. Absolutely hectic. Feature films of this length [102 minutes] are usually shot in two months and the way you break it down is you're shooting about three minutes a day.

"We were shooting six, seven minutes a day because of the budget. It was a small budget by Hollywood or international standards.

"We had something like 50 locations. Travel time was really hectic. We're dealing with a period piece. The reason we had so many locations was because we had to find little pockets in and around Joburg that looked like the 50s.

"We had to dress something like 1200 people in period costume. We're dealing with musicians of that time, the music of that time and getting musicians of today to play the music of that time.

"All these different factors had to come together and be made within 30 days. It was just ... it was hectic, it was a really hectic shoot."

One sweltering December day I was lucky enough to spend a few brief moments on location in Klipfontein, Johannesburg's oldest all-race settlement. The cast and set were dressed to resemble the now-vanished Sophiatown. Residents peered over the barriers at the strange goings-on.

The actors and crew may have eventually left but the images captured on film will continue to preoccupy a large number of people for some time to come. One of these was Los Angeles editor Troy Takaki who had arrived a week after the start of shooting.

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