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Catch a Fire celebrates unsung hero

Patrick Chamusso's journey from mild man to freedom fighter is no ordinary struggle film, writes CHRISTINA KENNEDY

WHEN the average South African hears the term struggle hero, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo inevitably come to mind. But for every high-profile liberation leader, there were thousands of nameless, faceless everymen who waged unseen wars against apartheid injustices.

One of these unsung heroes, a tiny cog in the wheel of change, is Patrick Chamusso, an ordinary man who was pushed to extraordinary lengths by a brutal system.

A diligent worker with a wife and family and who enjoyed soccer and photography, Chamusso's apolitical outlook changed radically when he was falsely accused of a crime and tortured, prompting him to join Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) in Maputo. He was imprisoned for 10 years on Robben Island for plotting to blow up a Secunda oil

refinery in 1981, but upon his release forgave his enemies and found a new lease on life as the "father" to more than 100 orphans in Mpumalanga.

His remarkable story is told in the film *Catch a Fire*, which opened on Friday. Directed by the celebrated Australian, Phillip Noyce (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*; *The Quiet American*, *The Bone Collector*), its screenplay was written by Shawn Slovo and it is co-produced by Robyn Slovo.

American actors Derek Luke and Tim Robbins play Chamusso and special branch cop Nic Vos respectively, and the remainder of the cast is South African, including Bonnie Henna, Mncedisi Shabangu, Mxo, Terry Pheto, Marius Weyers and Tumisho Masha.

The filmmakers are adamant that it is more than just another struggle film — it is a love story wrapped up in a gripping political thriller. "It's about a man who was prepared to give up everything to regain the core of his humanity and dignity in an inhumane system," says Noyce.

Chamusso says that while he is thrilled that his story has been told, it is painful to watch the film because its vivid realism takes him back to the bad old days. He is happy Luke was cast to portray him, although if it were his choice, he would have picked Masha.

"But Derek and I look alike, we're both religious, we both have beautiful wives and he loves children too," he says. "I opened my heart to him and gave him access to call me day and night for advice. He worked hard on the character. After three weeks of filming, Derek called me and said, 'Sawubona, un-

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jani!" It was unbelievable!"

Noyce says he would have preferred to cast South Africans in the lead roles, but the film would never have been financed without Robbins. Robyn Slovo says only a handful of non-South Africans were involved in the project. "The more collaboration there is in a film, the better. We need to stop being a small, myopic film industry. We're taking a South African story to the world stage, and it has to make a buck or two or people won't come back to make more films here."

Chamusso's eyes mist over when thinking back to those difficult times in the 1980s. "I was pushed to the point where I had to forget about my family and my job, where I was just a 'boy' and not a human being. I had to fight, and there was a point when I was prepared to die. It was a case of forward ever, backwards never."

A fire was lit in his belly, and he felt compelled to extinguish it, hence the film's title (it was almost called *Hot Stuff*, Chamusso's MK code name, but test audiences thought it sounded like a soft-porn movie). *Catch a Fire* is also the title of a Bob Marley song.

Noyce admits to feeling nervous and vulnerable as an outsider, but it has been pointed out to him that the story is best told by someone who doesn't bear the psychological wounds of apartheid, so that both sides can be fairly portrayed.

"The film is about the glory of the South African solution, in a world divided by ethnic and religious hatred," he says. "Patrick Chamusso's struggle illustrates the bigger miracle of SA. It's easy for South Africans to forget you are a beacon of hope for the rest of the world."

"In a lot of struggle movies, the white characters are often very one-dimensional," says Noyce, "but, hopefully, in the case of Tim's character, the audience feels his humanity and believes he loves his family and his country. That's the dilemma of a police officer: you're sworn to serve. But what happens to your soul if the law you're upholding is, at its core, morally corrupt?"

The late struggle stalwart, Joe Slovo, (played by Malcolm Purkey) features in the film as the MK commander in Maputo, and it was he who suggested to his daughter Shawn that she write about Chamusso. Robyn Slovo has a brief appearance as their mother Ruth First, who was killed by a parcel bomb in 1982.

"I initially insisted I couldn't play my mother, but my sisters said I had to do it, to pay homage to my mother and imprint her memory," says Robyn Slovo. "It was nerve-racking, especially since my mother was an incredibly glamorous woman, a well-

dressed icon of revolutionary fashion." Shawn Slovo met Chamusso a week after his release from jail, and within three days had taped his story, knowing that she would file it away until the time was right.

"I always wanted to tell the story of *Hot Stuff*," she says.

Chamusso has been feted in the US, meeting Clint Eastwood, Spike Lee and Morgan Freeman. But he insists his life is in White River, looking after 110 children at the Two Sisters Orphanage he built with his own hands.

"I don't recognise myself as a hero," he says. "Other people died, went to the gallows or went missing — I'm lucky to still be alive. But I have no regrets about the struggle."

"My main aim is to help other people. Every man in SA can change another man's life. SA is a great country to live in, as long as we care for one another and work together."

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Patrick and some of his fellow inmates climbed off the boat to find a massive crowd singing and celebrating. And then, in the sea of faces, he saw Precious.

She had come to apologise ...

For a moment he thought he could forgive her. But then she told him she was married and had had four other children.

He turned away from her.

After two weeks on the outside, he went to look for his children. Precious's mother had died, and they had been placed in the care of a neighbour.

When he walked through the door, they didn't know who he was. But then a tearful reunion followed.

Patrick's 11-year-old daughter and 9-year-old son said their mother hadn't returned since her trip to Cape Town. She was with their stepfather and her other children.

Their father did everything he could to give them a new life, but then, after six weeks, their mom came to the house with a social worker demanding the children.

Precious finally said she would stay with Patrick so that she'd be reunited with her children ... on condition that her other four children could join them.

But he refused.

And once again, he was devastated by the course of his life.

Epilogue:

Patrick started selling radios at a flea market. As he tried to rebuild his life, he met Connie - who was much younger than him - through an arranged marriage. As time went by, she became everything to him. They had two children together.

Since then, they have set up a home for HIV orphans in White River, Mpumalanga. It first began when he and Connie fostered the neighbours' twins after their parents died, but the children were HIV-positive and died in 1998. In 1999, he got a special pension and began building up the orphanage. He also did a course in home-based care. From 2000 to 2004 he supported 16 orphans, his two children and himself and Connie on R2 000. The surviving relatives of the orphans would also contribute food.

Then, in 2004, he received a call from Shawn Slovo: the story of his life, as she had written it in 1991 at her father's suggestion, was going to be made into a film.

All those involved in the film, titled *Catch a Fire*, began donating to the orphanage and suggested that he register it officially. There are now 110 children plus three of his own. With the help of volunteers, Patrick and Connie take care of the children themselves. When a child dies, they experience it as a death of their own.

Since the film was released overseas, he has travelled to the US and Canada. Every time he sees the film at a festival, he has to go outside before the question session starts because he is so emotional.

On September 9 2006, his mother died while he was at the premiere in Canada. His mom was so ill that he wasn't going to go, but she insisted. "If I am not here when you get back, take care of your children," she told him, "and please forgive your father."

Today Patrick is highly religious. He believes in God's power and sometimes thinks, "If this never happened to me, I would never have opened the orphanage."

He still carries around the diary that all the prisoners wrote in when he left Robben Island. And though all their words are meaningful to him, it was James Mange who prophesied the making of the movie.

His note reads: "Go well, Comrade. Time spent together was painful but pleasant. Someday history will reward our sacrifices - fruits for generations yet to come."

■ *Catch a Fire* opens at cinemas tomorrow.