

Source: CITY PRESS

Date: 11-Feb-2007

Topic: 06

Ref No:402



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ID: 03435440-01

Source Page: 6

cover story**A LOCAL HERO'S TALE**

In 'Catch a Fire', American actor Derek Luke plays an ordinary South African man who does extraordinary things to fight for his family, GAYLE EDMUNDS spoke to Patrick Chamusso, the man whose life inspired the film

Former Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) soldier Patrick Chamusso, who was released from Robben Island in 1991, meets me at the posh 10 Bompas hotel in Johannesburg. A place that is a far cry from his home in White River, Mpumalanga, where he and his second wife foster orphans under an organisation called Two Sisters. Of late, though, Chamusso, the son of a migrant Mozambican labourer, has been busy with a big Hollywood adventure that started 15 years ago. An adventure that has culminated in director Phillip Noyce's excellent political drama, *Catch a Fire*.

"When I was released from Robben Island, [screenwriter] Shawn Slovo's father Joe called me and told me that his daughter wants to write something about me – he never said a film. Joe arranged a meeting between me and Shawn – it was in Yeoville somewhere – and we spent about three days together. The nice thing about Shawn, she was the first person

to take me to a Chinese restaurant when I came out of prison," he laughs and rubs his stomach.

Chamusso was jailed in 1981 for his one-man operation to blow up the Secunda oil refinery in the Sasol2 bombings.

He was arrested twice in his 20s for political crimes he did not commit, which acted as a catalyst to prompt Chamusso to join the MK. He was initially arrested by overzealous policemen when travelling with his girlfriend from Zeerust. His crime was carrying a camera that could be used to spy on the government and he was deported to Mozambique, but returned later to the country to work for the Secunda refinery.

In 1980 the MK bombed the Secunda plant, along with two other Sasol installations, in what would become termed the Sasol1 bombings, and Chamusso was wrongly arrested in the aftermath of the bombings as he was one of the last drivers working at the refinery to leave the area where the bomb was placed. A year later Chamusso participated in the Sasol2 bombings that led to his arrest and incar-

ceration on Robben Island.

"I came out of prison on April 3 1991, three days before my birthday, and I didn't know where to start. My children had gone away, I didn't have a wife anymore, I didn't have a home anymore, I didn't know where my mother was or whether she was still alive. I didn't have any communication with my family and I had to go and look for them. Shawn had to give me some money so I could go and trace them. She was very kind.

"I thought Shawn was making a documentary. She said she would see if she could get a director or whatever. Then she went away for 14 years and Joe Slovo, the person who knew me, died in 1995. So I also threw everything away, I didn't put Shawn in my mind anymore. Even though she told me she was writing a film, I didn't believe that, mainly because of my background. I am an ordinary man and usually they don't write a film about a person like me – they go to educated people, they go to world-famous people, maybe the son of a chief."

The power of the film, however, lies in its depiction of an ordinary man. *Catch a Fire* follows the transformation of a young Chamusso from a hard-working, soccer-coaching, apolitical husband and father into a soldier who risks life and limb to fight the apartheid regime.

Chamusso was surprised to hear from Slovo again after 14 years, when she phoned to say she had a director and money to make the film. The director she'd found was Noyce, whose previous work includes the devastating true story *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the Oscar-nominated *The Quiet American* and the blockbusters *Patriot Games* and *The Bone Collector*. The next coup for the film was the securing of Tim Robbins (*Mystic River*, *The Shawshank Redemption*) to play the apartheid-era cop Nic Vos, who is a composite of two real policeman, and Derek Luke (*Antwone Fisher*, *Glory Road*) coming on board to play Chamusso.

Chamusso says, after he and his children had had a good laugh about the possibility of a film being made about him, he was invited to meet Noyce and Luke.

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"When they got here, they brought these big cameras and this tall man came out and when I looked at him I thought he was a farmer because he had shorts on - it's hot in Mpumalanga. I was expecting someone with a briefcase and I was expecting someone like Spike Lee as the

director." Chamusso wasn't familiar with Noyce's work and said so, prompting Noyce to go to the video store and hire *Patriot Games* for Chamusso, so he could see that he had done some work before.

Chamusso was just as nonplussed to see Luke too, whom he had never heard of either. He explains that in the rural area where he lives there is limited access to both DVDs and cinema and the only time he sees films is when they are screened on television. Often, after a day with his sometimes as many as 80 children, he is fast asleep by 6pm and doesn't get to see anything anyway.

"I looked at the actor and was expecting somebody else too, somebody like Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes or Cuba Gooding Jnr, because he looks a little bit like me," Chamusso says, smiling widely.

"Then Derek Luke started to ask me lots of questions about Patrick. He really wanted to get deep into Patrick and I realised that he wanted to do a good job. Three weeks later I answer the phone and he says, 'Kunjani.' He

was talking in isiZulu and he says, 'it's Derek Luke.' I said, 'Derek Luke, when did you learn Zulu?' He says he has a coach and he's working very hard and he says, 'do you still disapprove of me?' I said, 'carry on and we'll see,' he laughs.

"Then came Tim Robbins. I met him here at 10 Bompas, and someone said, 'that's Tim Robbins,' and I looked and saw he was a handsome somebody and I thought about those people who tortured me - the special branch are vicious people, very big and very cruel in the face." Chamusso says he had his reservations about whether Robbins could do the job until he saw Robbins on set the first time change from a handsome somebody into a terrifying tormentor.

Luke remembers his first meeting with Chamusso and being greeted by 85 children singing for him in their best clothes. "I went to interview Patrick and he turned around and interviewed me. He thought he looked like Cuba Gooding Jnr and he thought Denzel Washington should play him. And I said, 'Hey man, look, I'm a fan of both of them, but you got me.' And then his next question was do I know Beyoncé?"

Luke says of the role: "I was trying to understand Patrick's actions. He was an ordinary man and I think everybody was so intrigued, including me. I needed to find out why and how. I think the difficult thing for me was that I approached the role like an American. And I found out that my title in America was the problem - African-American. And when I found that out, I realised that I was just an African returning home. So the journey began."

Luke continues: "I was angry when I first went to South Africa. Some parts felt like I had missed a big party because the only thing I had in common for a long time was the colour of my skin. Everybody was speaking these beautiful languages and I felt like a tourist. I have not seen anywhere in the world display such courage as South Africa ... I had anger and I wanted to justify it.

"When you go to South Africa, and you hear Patrick's story, justification is overruled, you know. For a man to see his accuser and say, 'You know what? I forgave him and the rest is up to him.' That's huge."

After meeting the main players and visiting the set, Chamusso was convinced that the cast and crew were up to the job and, bravely, he spent a lot of time as a technical adviser on set consulting on the way things were: from the car he drove at the time to the way black

workers were searched at the oil refinery in Secunda. As much as Chamusso reiterates how ordinary he is, the film tells another tale. A tale of courage that is expertly told by a cast who mastered the accents and captured the essence of their characters and a director who, as he did in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, manages to recreate a time and place in South Africa.

Of the many actors who have had a go at the South African accent over the years - think of Denzel Washington's laboured syllables in *Cry Freedom* - Luke is the one who has come closest to the real thing. Luke, with the guiding

hand of Noyce, gives a performance worthy of all the critical praise he has received. Also, the film doesn't deal in stereotypes - the cartoonish apartheid policemen as seen in *In My Country* and *Cry Freedom* are nowhere to be seen. Instead, Robbins' character is a real man who does terrible things because he believes that the end justifies the means and his insinuating charm, as he threatens and cajoles his way into the lives of the Chamussos, is far more creepy than some cardboard cutout of a bogeyman.

There are those in the local film industry who are disappointed that the film was made with international actors, with the exception of Bonnie Henna (*Drum*), who plays Chamusso's first wife, Precious, and gives her a humanity and makes the audience sympathise with her despite her actions. The conundrum is, unfortunately, that to get the overseas exposure, the film must have recognisable names. Recognisable names are, of course, usually American ones and films, like any other commercial undertaking, must make money.

Also, after flops like the dreadful *In My Country*, there are plenty of arguments for South Africans to tell their own stories without foreign help. However, *Catch a Fire* is an example of how, with the right mix of skills and sensibilities, a uniquely South African tale becomes a universal fable about how an ordinary man can change his world with love and courage.

Catch a Fire is now on circuit. Visit www.two-sisters.org.za to help Chamusso's orphans.

*Derek Luke interview courtesy of UIP