

From Robben Island to the red carpet

A new film about the apartheid era is winning accolades. But the inspirational story of its hero is even more astonishing, as Andrew Meldrum discovered at an orphanage in South Africa

Catch a Fire

Oscar contender ... Catch a Fire

Andrew Meldrum

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At the orphanage he runs, deep in the far-flung hills of Mpumalanga province in north-eastern South Africa, Patrick Chamusso is suffering from jet lag. But he grins with pride at the laughing children playing in the dirt with a little Oscar statuette and a snowstorm paperweight containing a plastic White House. 'You should have seen me in New York,' he says. 'I had my own car and driver! The Four Seasons Hotel! But that is not true life. This is my home and working with these children is what makes me happy. That is not going to change.'

But however reluctant a hero, Chamusso is about to find fame; the remarkable story of his life in apartheid South Africa has been made into a film already being tipped for an Oscar. When The Observer tracked him down to the home he runs for children orphaned by Aids, he had just returned from a tour of North American premieres - Los Angeles, New York, Toronto and Atlanta - where his infectious, unaffected spark made him as sought-after on the red carpets as the stars.

Catch a Fire - shown last week at the London Film Festival and which opens in the UK next year - is set to turn this unassuming, unknown man into an international inspiration. 'I'm an ordinary man,' he says. 'I only did what was right in fighting for South Africa's freedom. Now I am living where I want, here in this township.'

Chamusso is a hero twice over. First he fought to end South Africa's apartheid regime and, despite enduring torture and 10 years in jail, he embraces the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation that is the hallmark of the new South Africa. Short, plump and pleasant, his extraordinary life story encompasses much of the country's compelling history.

It was 1981. Nelson Mandela was enduring the seventeenth year of imprisonment on the fortress of Robben Island when the most audacious and spectacular sabotage attack against the apartheid regime was carried out with a bombing of South Africa's Secunda power plant. Elated by the success of the attack, which cost no lives, the ANC's military mastermind, Joe Slovo, told his daughter, Shawn: 'If you ever want to tell a story about this period in

our history, you must tell the story of operative Patrick Chamusso, code name Hotstuff, he's a character. A maverick. A live wire.'

After achieving considerable success in apartheid South Africa as a black manager at the Secunda power plant, Chamusso was wrongly suspected of sabotage, tortured by police and jailed for six months. Outraged by the abuse, the previously apolitical Chamusso joined the armed wing of the African National Congress and devised a plan to destroy the plant. The plan, which is the basis of the film, involves creating a diversionary 'incident' that causes all the plant workers to flee, then setting off the main bombs.

Captured and sentenced to life imprisonment, Chamusso was sent to Robben Island where he spent 10 years until his release in 1991. Now, when he could be resting on his freedom fighter laurels, Chamusso, 56, and his second wife, Conney, have opened their home to orphans, 90 at the last count.

Critics have hailed the brisk storytelling of Shawn Slovo's screenplay, Philip Noyce's effective direction and skilled acting by Tim Robbins. Playing Chamusso, American actor Derek Luke has given a performance that has generated talk of an Oscar nomination.

"In prison I hated the whites, but Mandela, Sisulu and others taught us to forgive,' Chamusso said. 'And I can see it is much better than revenge. Anger can kill you. Working together, blacks and whites, makes South Africa great.'

This theory was put to the test when, years after his release, he met by chance one of his torturers. 'He had a burst tyre and I stopped by the road to help him. Afterwards I told him who I was. We were going to meet for lunch, but he quickly moved away from his house. He still felt guilty. I am free, but he feels guilty. Hate could go on and on and on, but someone must break the cycle, and I am happy to break the cycle.'

Chamusso is constantly interrupted by children, four-year-olds coming to sit on his lap and teenagers wanting him to watch their games. He is most animated when describing their stories. 'That boy came here last month when I was in Los Angeles for the premiere,' he says of a scrawny five-year-old. 'His parents had died and he was ill and had no energy. Now he is eating regularly and putting on weight every day and playing with the others.'

When Chamusso began taking in children, he named his home Two Sisters Orphanage, after two girls who had died. 'But the children came to me and said why are they orphans, when they have me as a father and Conney as a mother? So I painted over the word orphanage and now we call this a care centre.'

Chamusso houses the children in different huts with foster parents and they come to his main centre for breakfast before school and for dinner in the evening. He is especially proud of the athletic fields he has carved out of the hills - a football pitch and a netball court. The boys all sport bright yellow T-shirts that came from the movie when a few of the scenes were filmed at Two Sisters.

Paul, 13, is blind in one eye, but is nonetheless a skilled goalie. 'He does it to prove to the other boys that he can see,' says Chamusso. 'But he needs an eye operation.'

He is an enthusiastic coach. 'We are going to work. At least one of our boys will be on the national team by 2010 [when South Africa hosts the World Cup tournament],' he says fervently.

Chamusso still cannot quite believe that he is the subject of a movie: 'It was painful to visit the set, especially the one where I was tortured. It was so realistic, it was like I was reliving it.'

At first Chamusso was disappointed that Luke would play his character. 'I thought maybe I would be played by a big star like Denzel Washington or Cuba Gooding Jr or maybe Wesley Snipes.

'I have never heard of Derek Luke and I was worried about his American accent. But, when we met, he asked me lots of questions and I could see he wanted to learn. Two weeks later he phoned me and spoke in Zulu. That was great!'

Chamusso's highest praise is for writer Shawn Slovo and her producer sister, Robyn. Their father, Joe Slovo, was head of the ANC's military wing. Their mother, anti-apartheid activist Ruth First, was killed by a letter bomb sent by apartheid agents.

'Joe Slovo taught me about freedom. And those girls are a chip off the block. They worked hard to make the movie true. And they come here and help me with these kids. They are my sisters and I am their brother.'