

The unlikely activist



A scene from the new film *Catch A Fire*, telling the story of South African Patrick Chamusso

By Mike Pflanz

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Twice arrested for crimes he didn't commit, held for months without charge and tortured, Patrick Chamusso was driven to join the ANC and attempt a daring attack against apartheid. Now the subject of a Hollywood film, he insists he has only ever been an 'ordinary man'. By Mike Pflanz

Twin lightbeams slice through the night sky like dancing sabres. Below, a red carpet lined with flaming torches stretches to a marquee draped in scarlet satin and velvet. Three hundred or more guests stream towards the entrance, where an MC wearing a tiny black earpiece directs them to tables laden with crystal and silver.

Moving among them, greeting friends and well-wishers with a welcoming smile but shifting a little uncomfortably in his suit, is Patrick Chamusso, the unlikely man of the moment. Tonight is the latest premiere of a new Hollywood film, *Catch a Fire*, about this quiet, humble South African's all-but-forgotten life of a quarter century ago.

From the glittering razzmatazz of Los Angeles to chilly Toronto, Chamusso walked red carpets for weeks as the film opened across North America. Tonight's premiere, at a multiplex cinema tacked on to a shopping mall, is in his home town, the subtropical lowveld city of Nelspruit, 230 miles east of Johannesburg.

Directed by Phillip Noyce (*The Quiet American*, *Patriot Games*), *Catch a Fire* charts Chamusso's forced evolution from an inconspicuous and apolitical man dedicated only to football and family, into someone responsible for one of the most audacious attempts to tear down South Africa's apartheid regime – a man police termed a terrorist, who was tortured, beaten and finally sentenced to 24 years in jail with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island.

It is powerful stuff. But to Chamusso, even now, all the glamour, the attention and the glad-handing seem a little excessive, embarrassing even. 'I have seen a lot of places and met a lot of people, but I was always surprised anyone would want to watch a film about my life. I am just an ordinary man and now I want my ordinary life back,' he tells me, tired after a bad night's sleep, the day after the premiere.

Yes, today Patrick Chamusso is, to some extent, an ordinary 56-year-old man. On meagre funding, he and his second wife, Conney, run a care centre for 110 children orphaned by HIV. He watches football. He is a dedicated Christian.

And he was an ordinary man when he was younger, growing up in apartheid South Africa. His father was a migrant miner from Mozambique, working short-term jobs in Johannesburg, where he met Patrick's mother, and then returning home when the work dried up.

Despite leaving school at 13, Patrick was ambitious and worked hard for promotions in his job at the Secunda oil refinery. While -others around him were meeting secretly, pledging oaths to the -nascent and outlawed African National Congress (ANC), scheming attacks on white-run institutions and declaring a war on segregation, Patrick kept his head down and stayed clear of politics. But politics came to find him. Twice arrested and tortured for crimes he did not commit, Chamusso hardened into a bitter man backed into a corner by a regime that attacked him because of his skin colour.

This led him to the ANC's base in Mozambique, and on October 21, 1981, he slipped into the Secunda refinery on a one-man mission to blow up the plant where he had once worked. Had he been successful, Chamusso would have knocked out the power supply to a large swath of northern South Africa.

Despite the ingredients – terrorism, bomb attacks, detention without charge – Catch a Fire is far from a profile of political fanaticism. It is the story of one 'ordinary' man forced to fight back.

As a young man Patrick Chamusso was 'not interested in politics'. He never talked back to his white masters, working within the hated system, not against it. His concerns were his family – his then wife, Precious, and two daughters – and football, which he played and coached fanatically. Of course, he felt the brutal restrictions of apartheid daily, but believed he could do nothing to fight it.

'I could not see how all this talk of fighting would stop the government; they were always going to be stronger. Living with apartheid was terrible, unjust and illegal, but I was just a man: how could I change the way things were?' he says.

He lived quietly, tried to ignore the injustice, devoted his energy to his family, accepted his lot. 'There were many of us like me, not everyone wanted to be a fighter.' But then began the first in a chain of events that would lead him, five years later, to the coal conveyor belt, strapped with explosives, on his mission of destruction.

'The first time I was arrested, I was driving back from my sister-in-law's wedding,' says Chamusso, today a smiling, short and stocky man with a paunch and a close crop of black hair flecked with grey. 'It had been such a happy day and I remember I was wearing a new suede jacket. I felt I was the best-dressed man at the party.'

'Ahead, there was a roadblock. The police came to my window and asked me whose car I was driving. They found my camera, saw my jacket and said, "You are lying, these things are not yours. You are under arrest." '

It was 1976. To South Africa's white authorities, it was inconceivable that a black man aged 26 could own a car, a camera, a smart suede jacket. Chamusso was dragged from his family, handcuffed and taken to a remote farm which housed an infamous Special Branch interrogation centre.

Chamusso was there for six months. He was never allowed to see a lawyer. He was beaten and tortured daily, as screams from other inmates echoed across the empty landscape. He was made to stand for eight hours, his arms tied tightly behind him. He was kept in a tiny cell, often with no mattress or blanket against the bitter highveld chill. He went days without water.

Midway through 1977 Chamusso was released without charge. He returned to his family, to his job, to football. Deep inside him, a flame of anger was growing, but he did not realise the profound effect his imprisonment had had on him. Yet.

'Everyone was being arrested. I was very, very angry because I was innocent, because they had taken me when I had done nothing, but I had my life back, I could go on. I could see the incentive just to go back to my family,' he says.

Three years later, ANC guerrillas attacked the Secunda oil plant where he worked. That day, Chamusso had feigned illness and bunked off to take his football team to a tournament they would go on to win. Later he was stopped at a police checkpoint. Again a police officer was at the car window, suspicion written on his face. Again Chamusso was arrested. Again he was innocent.

He was taken back to the farmhouse torture centre. This time, the Special Branch felt they had evidence. Chamusso worked at the plant; he had been arrested before. He must have shown the ANC attackers where to cut through the fence and where to place the bombs.

His wife had discovered he had a girlfriend with whom he had a son, and told the police he was not at home the night of the attack. Incensed, she was convinced he was with the other woman (he was, after the game). Chamusso, afraid to lose his job for lying about taking the team to the tournament, stuck to his story, saying he was at home, sick. Knowing he was not telling the truth, and sure he was behind the explosions, the police kept him imprisoned for four months. There, they beat him, tortured him, pushing for his confession.

Chamusso stuck firm. Only when the police arrested his wife, beat her (and possibly raped her, Chamusso is not sure), did he succumb, falsely admitting to all the charges in the hope they would let Precious go. They did.

As they continued to interrogate Chamusso, probing for names he did not have, hide-out locations he did not know, codewords he had never heard, the police realised his admission was a lie. He was finally released. Without charge.

That second arrest was the turning point for Chamusso, who yearned for a simple life separate from the chaos and hate around him. 'I decided when I was released, let me go and

join these ANC people and learn their ideas so that the next time I am arrested I have actually done something,' he says. 'This was an act of defence, because you cannot be pushed so many times towards a hole without pushing back to save yourself from falling.

'The worst thing about the first two arrests was I went through all of that and I was innocent. Definitely, I was going to be arrested again: this was apartheid South Africa; I was on their lists.

'But when that happened, I wanted to be arrested because I had done something, because I was guilty. It was the apartheid regime, the way they treated me, that pushed me into politics and to do what I did. If they had left me alone, this would not have happened.'

Chamusso left his family straight after his release, and went to join the ANC in exile in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. While training there, he met Joe Slovo, a white South African dedicated to overthrowing apartheid, a communist (the ANC was closely connected to Moscow), and the commander of the ANC's militant wing, MK.

'Slovo was a good man,' Chamusso says. 'I felt I could trust him. I told him they had made mistakes when they blew up the oil refinery last. I knew the place. I had a better idea.'

Slovo listened as Chamusso outlined his plan. First, bomb the water tanks. This would act as a warning to workers to flee the compound (the ANC was, for the most part, committed to not taking lives in their attacks). Then, bomb the core reactor. With the water supplies knocked out, there would be nothing with which to fight the ensuing fire. The whole place would be destroyed, and South Africa, under global sanctions at the time, would struggle to find the parts to fix it.

For the isolated South African government, the Secunda plant was a symbolic two fingers up to the outside world, proving they needed no help to run their infrastructure. Destroying it would be a coup for the ANC. Slovo was easily convinced.

Four months later, on October 18, 1981, Chamusso crossed into South Africa from Swaziland on a fake passport, in a car belonging to an ANC sympathiser, heading for Secunda. Despite supposedly watertight security at the plant, he managed to slip in undetected by hanging on to a conveyer belt used to carry coal from 20 miles away into the core reactor.

Chamusso was about to carry out one of the most audacious attacks on the apartheid regime that the ANC had ever attempted. 'When I arrived in Mozambique, I was there because of what apartheid did to me and my family. That was my motivation. But then I heard their speeches and I began to believe we could make South Africa for all South Africans. I wanted to fight for that.

'I was committed,' he says. 'This was my plan; I would complete it or die trying. I kept hearing in my mind the ANC slogan, "Forwards ever, backwards never." Now, I was a political man.'

But his plan failed. He did manage to blow up the water tanks, but the Special Branch found the main bomb on the reactor and defused it. Chamusso, dressed in the blue overalls and white hard hat worn by all staff, escaped in the melee.

Three days later, the hunt was up. Betrayed by his wife, who directed police to his girlfriend's home, where she knew he would be hiding, he was arrested. Again, he was taken to the interrogation centre. Despite admitting his guilt, he was tortured as the police tried to make him reveal the inner workings of the ANC operation in Mozambique.

Eight months after his arrest, he was charged with high treason, carrying explosives, entering South Africa on a false passport and bringing ANC material into the country. He pleaded guilty to all but the high treason.

'They told me I would be hanged, but in the end I was sentenced to a total of 24 years on Robben Island. I don't know why they didn't execute me. Maybe they thought if they turned me to their side, I could be used by them. That was never going to happen, I was committed to the struggle by then.'

On Robben Island, Chamusso did not meet Mandela, but was closely linked to other leading activists. 'It was a bad place, of course, but we were together. We talked and waited for the time we would be free. All of us believed that day would come; we knew the struggle would be successful.'

They were released when apartheid was dismantled in 1990 and 1991. 'That was the end of my politics. I wanted to go home,' Chamusso says.

Most of his fellow inmates stuck close to the ANC, hoping for and then winning high positions in the post-apartheid government led by Nelson Mandela. By contrast, Chamusso fled back to the open spaces and warm weather of the eastern lowveld. With his second wife, Conney, he built a four-room bungalow on a hill overlooking a valley dotted with smallholdings under the shadow of rocky hilltops, near the provincial town of Witrivier.

The couple began to take in Aids orphans, at first fostering just two sisters, named Thandeka and Thandiwe. The girls died soon after, but Conney and Patrick kept going, naming their home the Two Sisters Care Centre after their first charges. It now cares for 110 children who have lost parents to the virus.

The centre (twosisters.co.za) is chronically underfunded. Chamusso often struggles to pay even for clean drinking water for the children. Most of the money comes from his meagre £20-a-month pension from the ANC – nowhere near enough for the borehole he wants to sink.

'This is my life now, this is all I need,' he says. 'Politicians, even the new ones since apartheid, they have lied to people here. They have promised electricity, roads, water, but nothing has come yet.'

'Maybe I should now be thinking that I should be a big man, a minister or a businessman, but it is better I stay with low-down people. It is here I think I can do more for the people who suffer the most.'

Many would argue that using his limited money to care for children who are not his own is extraordinary, but this puzzles Chamusso. 'They need the help and I can help them. Why would I not?'

Chamusso had never spoken to Conney about his life with the ANC. She knew he was involved in the struggle, but he never wanted to talk about it. Then in May 2004 he received a call out of the blue from Joe Slovo's daughter, Shawn. A scriptwriter, she had met Chamusso in 1991 with her father, who had suggested his story could be made into a film. 'We talked about it, I told them everything that had happened, then I heard nothing until Shawn phoned me and said she had found a director. I said, a director for what? She said, for the film I've written about you.

'I completely could not understand why someone wanted to write about me. I keep telling you, I am an ordinary man. Now I have seen the film, I see there are things which interest people about it, but I still don't understand why they want to watch that more than [other] things.'

For all the struggles running *Two Sisters*, Chamusso seems a happy and contented man. Despite the fact that many of his torturers are still alive, revenge is not on his mind. His faith (he is a Methodist) has neutered his anger, he says.

One drizzling late afternoon in 1999, Patrick and Conney were driving to Johannesburg and pulled over to help a stranded motorist with two burst tyres. Only as he got out of his car did Patrick see that the man was Nic Vos, the senior police officer who hunted him down and supervised his torture all those years ago.

'He did not recognise me. I helped him with his car, and he was so thankful, he gave me his number and invited me to dinner. When I called him, I said, "You didn't recognise me, did you?" He said, "No." I said, "I'm Patrick Chamusso."

'Straight away, so friendly, he said, "Ah yes, how are you? Are you in the government?" Nothing else. And he invited me to dinner again. I said yes, even though I knew I couldn't eat with him, but I wanted to ask him what was going through his mind when he tortured me, why he didn't believe me the first time.

'I wanted to ask him, "Can't you see that if you torture a person, treat him like that, when he has done nothing, you can be sure that he will come back. But he will come back angry; you will not be able to stop him." '

When Patrick and Conney arrived at Vos's house a fortnight later, it was empty – furniture, curtains, light fittings all gone. Neighbours told Patrick the family had packed up and sold out in less than a week. Problems with the bank, they had speculated.

'I laughed. I was a bit surprised, but I realised, they are the ones running now.'