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New Movie 'Catch A Fire' Tells True Story of Anti-Apartheid Activist Patrick Chamusso

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*Oppression and brutality drive an ordinary man to become a revolutionary in a new film set during the turbulent last years of apartheid in South Africa. Based on a true story, it features Derek Luke and Oscar-winner Tim Robbins. Alan Silverman has a look at **Catch A Fire**.*

Before he became a radical, Patrick Chamusso lived a good life for a black man in 1980 South Africa. His job at the Secunda oil refinery east of Johannesburg earns enough to make a decent home for his wife and children; and he makes time to coach a local youth soccer team. However, the respect he earns in his township community means little to the ruling white authorities who see Patrick as just another black man.

When the military wing of the outlawed African National Congress or ANC attacks the refinery in 1980, Patrick, like all the other black men in his township community, is a suspect.

Brutal interrogations, beatings and degradation fail to extract a confession from this innocent man, so the police investigator hauls in Patrick's wife, Precious. She is beaten and humiliated; and that, finally, is too much for him to endure. Patrick disappears across the border to Mozambique where he joins up with ANC rebels and ultimately becomes the violent radical police had wrongly accused him of being.

After a year of guerrilla training, Patrick returns to South Africa and launches his own bomb attack on the refinery. A massive manhunt leads to his capture and, convicted under anti-terrorism laws, he is sentenced to Robben Island where he remains until the 1991 amnesty that freed political prisoners.

American actor Derek Luke, who starred in the 2002 drama *Antwone Fisher*, plays Patrick and he says traveling to South Africa to make this film

gave him important insight into how the anti-apartheid struggle shaped this character and the nation.

"What startled me about apartheid is how much, as an American ...and African-American ...that I did not know," Luke admits. "The awesome responsibility I felt is that if acting is anything educational, maybe this will wake up my own neighborhood. When we say that we really have it hard, I think sometimes we can be naive about it."

Tim Robbins plays Police Security Branch colonel Nic Vos, a composite character based on several investigators who went after Patrick.

"My job with this guy was not necessarily to make him mean," explains Robbins, "but to find how human he is. Everybody has families that they love and everybody has fears and their job to do."

Director Philip Noyce says it was important not to flinch - not to turn his camera away from the horrors and violence of the struggle; but the Australian-born film maker calls it the story an ordinary man who did something extraordinary.

"I thought that it was a great and uplifting story and that was its relevance alone," he says. "You can look for relevance, but I think you only find it by making a good and compelling story. You leave relevance up to the audience. Certainly in screening the film around America and the UK, as we have done since the first cut was done back in March, it seems that audiences relate to this story even though it is set in the past. Maybe it's because from history and our actions in the past we will be able to see the future.

Catch A Fire ends with scenes of the real Patrick Chamusso today with some of the 85 children - many of them AIDS orphans - he cares for at the Two Sisters orphanage which he established to create a better future for them and their country.

"What I am doing there is to change the community to realize that both of us, black and white, need a rehabilitation ...all of us," Chamusso says. "We need to tolerate one another. We need to work together to get a new South Africa. Otherwise we won't make it."

Catch A Fire also features South African actress Bonnie Mbuli Henna as Precious Chamusso. The screenplay is by Shawn Slovo and the film is co-produced by her sister Robin. South Africa-born, they grew up in exile because of the anti-apartheid activism of their late father, Joe Slovo.