

Zielinski

**Review of
„Drum“**

South Africa in Films

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published in cooperation with

filmrezension.de
online-magazin für filmkritik

Düsseldorf 2007

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1. Film review: Drum

More than telling Henry`s story.....

Changes

The story of the film "Drum" takes place in Sophiatown in the 1950s, in one of the last black territories which seemed to be to some degree protected against the evil and destructive influence of the Apartheid system which dominated South Africa during that time. But appearances are often deceptive. Actually, it is a tough and cruel time, full of black resistance against the white minority, full of struggle and hope as well as of despair. It is a time of political changes and overthrow with the danger coming closer and closer day by day. It is still underneath the surface, but it is moving upwards, powerful and white.

The 1950s are a time of hope in Sophiatown, but also in some respects mixed up with repression, with escaping from reality.

Among those people who are caught up in this dubious situation of hoping and repressing, are Henry Nxumalo, the sports journalist and centre of the "Drum"-editorial, his wife Florence, their two children and a lot of Henry`s appreciated friends he works with at the "Drum" magazine. They try to get along and manage everyday life in Sophiatown, always on the path between facing and escaping the bitter truth they are surrounded by.

"Drum" in Sophiatown: where the action takes place...

The director Zola Maseko throws the viewer into a conflicting, but fascinating scene of the Sophiatown of the 1950s, a place where culture and jazz music are flourishing in the sparkling and illegal shebeens, where blacks, whites and gangsters meet to dance, to drink, to sing, to love, to enjoy time and to simply forget. It is a place where love relationships across the colourline exist without any regard to what the "white law" dictates. The shebeens are a source of hope and zest of life and therefore, they are often picked up by Henry, his best friend Jürgen Schadeberg, the photographer of the "Drum"-editorial, Can Themba, teacher and short-story writer for "Drum", and other colleagues. The relaxing atmosphere of these bars give them the pleasure and will to believe that it is still possible to save their self-respect and take control of their lives on their

own¹ apart from the danger of the white oppressor. The present situation in Sophiatown is perfectly mirrored in the doings and intentions of the Drum Decade with the "Drum" magazine as its most significant literary result. "Drum" came into being as a monthly magazine in Cape Town in March 1951 and was headed by Jim Bailey². Together with Anthony Sampson, he worked out a more modern approach for "Drum" and apart from topics such as sports, events of cultural life and politics of African nationalism³, "Drum" was supposed to reveal the real feelings of the blacks and to express the true atmosphere of black urban life⁴. Under the editorship of Sampson, crime⁵ was also a central feature of "Drum" as it mirrored the hardships black people had to undergo every single day in the townships of South Africa. The successful concept of "Drum" can shortly be summarized as it remains consistent over the years and refuses an adoption of any revolutionary voice. But, although political statements are made rather faint-hearted, "Drum" claims to give moral advice and traces back to civilized values and better race relations⁶. This concept is reflected in Henry Nxumalo's personality as well as in his mentality and working methods. It was his ambitious investigations which made "Drum" modify its contents over the years to gain realism and to have a good look at racial segregation and the inhuman conditions black people had to suffer from under white control. "Drum" as an entertaining and political magazine, written by blacks and read by the black majority, gave a voice to black people and still does so today. This is embodied by Drum's black journalists as Henry or Can who use their voice to disclose the defects and the misery and who write articles to express themselves; to set their emotions free.

Henry: An egoistic betrayer or the hero of his epoch?

But it is less the change of the magazine itself which is presented throughout the whole film, it is much more the turning point of Henry's personality and the change of his perspective of seeing, judging and articulating things which is outlined within 97 minutes. Zola Maseko achieves the incredible and creates the rather ordinary and typical personal development of the protagonist Henry in a way which makes the viewer remain attentive and excited, always looking forward to the next scene. Henry is described as a character with features of a

¹ Compare: "More Than Telling a Story: Drum and its Significance in Black South African Writing", in: Michael Chapman (e.d.), *The Drum Decade. Stories of the 1950s*, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press 1989, p. 184

² Compare: ebd., p. 186

³ Compare: ebd., p. 185

⁴ Compare: ebd., p. 187

⁵ Compare: ebd., p. 191

⁶ Compare: ebd., p. 194

certain popular stereotype. He symbolizes the selfish and unfaithful husband who betrays his wife Florence and deceives his whole family while having a love affair with Dara, one of the musicians in the shebeen. His transformation from an inconsiderate and rather superficial womanizer to a thoughtful, sensible and interested family father who sees reason is to some degree foreseeable as one knows it from other stories shown on TV or described in books. But in "Drum" things are presented differently. We do not see Henry waking up in the morning suddenly realizing what a fool he has been and in what a mess he has been caught up. He does not decide to change his life, to split up with Dara and to return to his family in loyalty out of the blue. It is a long procedure and what makes this film so special and remarkable is, that we do not see Henry develop just through inspiration but through action. This way of changing one's personality is much more moving and convincing because it proves Henry's discipline, motivation, commitment and his real will to change things. "Drum" makes it possible for the viewer to accompany Henry through several stations of his life and of his inner changes, to feel with him, to be close to him, to learn together with him. It is a process of realizing and of getting a clearer insight into the Apartheid system. This is a common process, the viewer sees and understands through Henry's eyes. We see the development of a sports journalist who tries to enjoy life as intensively as possible to a secret "freedom fighter" who suddenly starts to take responsibility for his doings and investigations.

... and that's why he is called "Mr Drum"

The importance of Henry for the whole "Drum" magazine is demonstrated via special camera techniques. When he enters the editorial in one of the first scenes, he is filmed in a long shot and his steps are continuously followed by the camera. The focus of the camera corresponds to the reaction of his colleagues when he arrives at the editorial. All the heads are turned to Henry, all eyes focus his face, everybody is happy to see him and is laughing at him. Right from the beginning, the viewer gets the impression, that Henry is a smart man who is very popular with a charming appearance. He earned his title "Mr Drum" by courage, enterprise⁷, innovation and by curiosity for the world of experience for black people. His first step in this direction is made through his talk with a desperate old woman in front of the "Drum" office who misses her son who has been put under arrest one year ago on a working farm called

⁷ Compare: ebd p. 194

“Harmony”⁸. The farm is under control of a white farm boss. Henry decides to do some research on the “Harmony” farm to help the woman to find her son and he arrives at the farm disguised as a day-labourer. The viewer immediately realizes the irony in the name “Harmony”. The working-conditions of the black slaves are far away from being human and peaceful. Strokes, insults, abuses and the devaluation of human beings dominate the workers` everyday life and Henry gets in contact with these conditions, too. He faces the poverty and misery of the other farm workers but he cannot stand the situation and we see some signs of Henry`s weakness. With the help of his best friend, Jürgen Schadeberg, he escapes from “Harmony” farm. Watching the happenings and actions at “Harmony” farm is as if an icecold wind blew over your skin which makes you shiver with fear. You feel frozen as the working slaves may also feel; the hard working conditions and the cruel treatment simply erase all kinds of positive emotions. “Harmony” farm is like a cruel, hard, icy and endless winter. You get lost in snow and storms but you never get out of it again. In the case of the slaves it is the loss of their personality. But after collecting these shocking impressions, Henry does not give up, his curiosity in doing more research even increases. Reconsidering the biography of the historical Henry Nxumalo, this is perfectly understandable. Henry comes from a poverty-stricken childhood⁹. He was born at Mvutshini, Margate (Natal Province) in 1917 as the first child of Lazarus and Josephine Nxumalo. Although he concentrated on his writing activities and tried to improve his skills in “Post” newspaper in Johannesburg, he always saw both sides of life: On the one hand, he enjoyed his tight social network of African intellectuals, but on the other hand, he joined the South African Army where intellectual skills never help you to save your life. He even went to Egypt where the South African forces were involved in combat¹⁰. Henry had to use his hands for hard work as well as his brains for intellectual achievements, therefore we may assume that he has never forgotten his roots. The film “Drum” demonstrates vividly that being a professional means both: Combining qualities of a success-oriented, ambitious journalist with emotional and sensitive qualities and this is exactly what Henry tries to achieve throughout the whole film.

⁸ Compare: <http://www.drum-derfilm.de/inhalt> Stand: 09.02.2007

⁹ Compare: Michael Chapman, 1989, p. 188

¹⁰ Compare: www.info.gov.za/nxumalo.htm Stand: 22.02.2007

The women in Henry's life: the dilemma between seduction and reason

It is remarkable to see that it is Florence who induces Henry to change his working methods and the contents of his articles. She encourages him to use his voice to write about the tough reality of Sophiatown which means having no access to clean water, no electricity, no schools, and facing diseases, racial segregation, etc. Henry does not oppose her influences and bears Florence's words in mind which shows that he still is in some way connected to her. This scene which breaks into their conversation makes clear that Henry is still caught up between two female images at this moment. On the one hand, there is Dara, who symbolizes fun, lust, sex, variety in life and escapism and on the other hand, there is Florence who represents his conscience, trust, seriousness, everyday life, constancy but also reality. The film "Drum" uses colours very effectively and the symbolic value of Dara and Florence is impressively mirrored in the respective surroundings. Dara is the queen of the shebeen, she stands in the sparkling spotlight and makes Henry nearly forget his wife. In the shebeen, there are flashing lights, everything is bright, friendly and in a blaze of colour. Back at home, where Florence is, reality cannot be glossed over, the curtains fall down and everything is rather cheerless and dreary, expressed by darker colours. Everything is dreary because everything is real at home. In the shebeen, anything is true, not even pleasure is true and constant pleasure. It is the place where Henry is neither a sports journalist nor a husband. It is a fairyland. In the mystic bar he is just a man with human needs, looking for hope, looking for change, looking for something new. Dara is the easiest way out of his problems because she helps him to avoid confrontation while Florence forces him to face reality. Therefore, it is remarkable to see how Henry decides between the two women in the end.

The human yearning for the "sweet escape"

A further step which shows that Henry tries to gain strength and resistance in his personality is the fact that he does not fulfill Alpheus's wishes. Alpheus is an unscrupulous gangster boss in Sophiatown who tries to blackmail Henry because he wants him to put his photo on the front page of the next edition of "Drum". Henry acts differently with devastating consequences. It is a remarkable change in Henry compared to the fact that he was susceptible for Alpheus's evil influences at the beginning of the film.

If one would summarize it briefly, Henry's whole life is dominated by the dilemma between escapism and confrontation. The tension of this conflict rises at the jubilee celebration of "Drum" and is again underlined by an effective use of music and colours. It is the contrast between brightness and darkness and between noise and silence. The party is the place where the colourful scenery and relaxing music indicate a life of joy and success, far away from any problems. But colours and music can also gloss over uncomfortable facts and may function as Henry's make-up. They illuminate everything Henry wants to be and wishes to embody, but they conceal his inner conflicts and darker sides. It is the party where Henry got his title "Mr Drum" and where he is admired by everybody as the glorified hero who has written a sincere and innovative article about the "Harmony" farm. But at the same time the viewer remembers the fact that this hero still is an unfaithful husband. Florence and Dara meet for the first time this evening and Florence's suspicion increases to its climax. The viewer clearly recognizes the two worlds Henry cannot decide to which he belongs to. The jubilee celebration is accompanied by bright colours, cheerful music and an amusing atmosphere. It resembles to some degree the situation in the shebeen. It is not reality. It is not South Africa. It is a party where heroes can exist. But in real life it is not questioned to be a hero or "Mr Drum", it is questioned to be a fighter and a survivor. After the party Henry again gets in touch with reality. Back in the car together with Florence there is no music and there are no colours. It is dark, silent, oppressing- a kind of disillusionment. The colours, the noises and the pleasure of the party fade away and Henry has to face Florence's accusation to be unfaithful- he has to face reality. It is pure, tormenting reality which remains without any chances for escaping or excusing. It is an exciting moment between day and night, between Henry's dreams, wishes, lies, vices and his good intentions to change the situation in Sophiatown as well as in his marriage. It is interesting to see how the protagonist Henry triggers contrasting and confusing feelings in the viewer. On the one hand, he arouses a sense of empathy as being an ordinary person with mistakes, qualities and human needs as everybody else in the world. Henry embodies both: Our dark sides as well as our love of justice. We may even feel with Henry looking back to moments in our past where we decided to run away instead of staying; moments in which we had the feeling that it is unbearable to face the truth and even more difficult to change the situation. But on the other hand, the viewer gets angry, too and cannot justify his doings because Henry is destroying his family which is a fact that cannot be glossed over. The most fascinating about Henry is probably that his personality is so many-sided. This is, what makes us laugh, worry, doubt, happy and sad.

We all carry a “small Henry” in our hearts. Some qualities we would like to eradicate and some different qualities we appreciate. It is the well-calculated mixture of everything in human life which amazes people. This is the same with Henry. Nevertheless, the viewer continues to look forward to the complete turning point of Henry’s personality because he does not want to stop believing in his good and inner qualities. It seems to be a human yearning to believe in the good sides of people and therefore one can say that the film “Drum” more or less consciously works with human needs and yearning and throws the viewer didactically into a situation to think about moral standards and values.

Prison No. 4: Where some lives end and some others change

Henry does not disappoint the viewer. He continues his mission and is more and more risking his life. He goes to Prison No.4 as a volunteer to get new insights into the treatment and living conditions of black prisoners. He stays in prison for two days and gets insights he has never wished to be part of his memory. He realizes that the system of Prison No.4 and its rules and ways of treating the prisoners are the microcosm of South Africa as a whole. It is a humiliating procedure of devaluing human beings. The experience of two days in Prison No.4 gives Henry a shattering perspective of the future of South Africa: The black people will get lost in a lifelong imprisonment under white control. The dramatic effect of the scene in which Henry is in prison is reached by a special technique. The noises of the everyday life of people in prison are hardly audible. Instead of this, the scenes in prison are underlined by Henry talking retrospectively about his shocking and far-reaching experiences and typing on his type-writer the enlightening and moving article about his stay in prison move the viewer deeply and face him as well as Henry with the truth- and isn’t it the case, that we very often hate and avoid facing the truth? His typing on the type-writer is filmed in a close-up which characterizes it as an individual detail which belongs to Henry and his personality to express himself. The act of writing is not only characteristic of Henry, it is also a way to free himself from impressions which torment him and to articulate emotions which are hardly bearable. Writing can be used to digest a past and transferred to the political situation in Sophiatown, writing can assimilate and preserve the hurtful and fascinating history of South Africa to make it everlasting and unique. The repressive and imbalanced relation between the black prisoners and the warders is also underlined by the camera positions. The warders are filmed through the eyes of the prisoners in a low-angle shot which makes them seem more powerful and superior to the prisoners. As a consequence, the prisoners seem small, weak, insignificant and vulnerable.

The tough stay in prison triggers off a progress of reformation in Henry; he more and more sees reason and thinks and works rationally. The trips to the shebeens do not fill him with such pleasure anymore and in a conversation with Jürgen he gives him the advice to marry later on because he has come to the conclusion that having Florence as a wife is a real gift one should never risk. He splits up with Dara, enlightened and changed by his emotions for Florence, his tasks of taking responsibility and by the political developments around him. He and Jürgen discover plans of "New Sophiatown" in the city hall. It is a time in Sophiatown when protest marches headed by Nelson Mandela work against the Apartheid system. It is useful to add some information about the historical background. During the 1950s, black people in Sophiatown were threatened by removal. They were forced to leave their homes and to go to the Meadowlands¹¹. This mirrors again the ambivalent character of Sophiatown where "(...), gaiety and destruction are seen to be inextricably intertwined."¹² On the one hand, we see the glamour of the night life in the shebeens and on the other hand, we see the rebellion of the black majority which fights unconditionally against the white minority to stay in their homes and to save their "African pride"¹³, their feeling of self-importance and individuality that nobody can take away from them, not even the white people. The film "Drum" expresses and explains these two faces of Sophiatown with perfection, empathy and a significant yearning for the truth. This impression is confirmed if you consider the German subtitle "Wahrheit. Um jeden Preis." It assumes that every intention and every content in "Drum" circles around the one and only topic; the truth. Apart from that, the film is actually based on a true story which reinforces this effect. Henry's transformation from a sports journalist to a reporter of disclosure who goes beyond his personal limits and who risks his life is not by pure chance. This development of the plot is expected and needed by the viewer in order to reconcile to Henry and sympathize with him again. "Drum" tries to cover our needs and wishes and it is a question of interpretation if the film presents a happy ending or if it just gives a prospect for happy or better developments in the future. Nevertheless, in the last scenes of "Drum" it is again the music which triggers emotions and hope but it is the task of every single viewer to judge this film as giving positive or negative prospects. Watching "Drum" will be a moving discovery for the interested viewer, you will go on exploring your own thoughts, beliefs, morals standards and your attitudes towards truth and escaping from it via the identification with the protagonist. "Drum" offers the opportunity and good sources of identification as

¹¹ Compare: Michael Chapman, 1985, p. 193

¹² See: ebd

¹³ See: ebd., p. 197

Henry embodies both; the human sort of strength and weakness everybody of us shows day by day. It only depends on the circumstances and the social environment which of those two features dominate and reach the surface of our personality.

In spite of "Drum`s" honourable intentions to help the viewer to look through the rules of the Apartheid system and to understand the consequences of the brutal racial segregation, gaps still remain and leave the viewer with open questions. It is to some degree unsatisfactory that Henry tends to make his statements in his articles with prudence and caution. His articles are critical and revealing, but he avoids provocation and clear accusations or political comments. The viewer experiences that Henry has bite in his investigations but he misses this bite in his writings. There still is a lack of resistance which makes me attribute four and not five stars (****) to this film. It is fascinating in detail but it lacks the right dose of rebellion and courage. Henry`s written articulation is in contrast to his daredevil ventures. It is true that he is the energetic "Mr Drum" with a thirst for action who disregards the doubts and worries of his boss and chief editor Jim Bailey who cares about the reputation of the "Drum" magazine, but on the other hand, he is rather faint-hearted in the beginning of the film and enjoys the advantages of being a sports reporter in Sophiatown covered as a fairyland. Therefore, one should be careful with praising and glorifying Henry rashly.

Drum`s "educating" task: introspection

To summarize the intentions of the film, one can say that "Drum" informs, teaches and entertains the viewer at the same time as it provides us with historical and cultural basics and appeals to our conscience as well as to our human and social needs. And on the top of it, it touches us where we are sensitive and irritable: "Drum" affects the perception of our own personality. It offers us a possibility of balanced and constructive self-criticism without being pushing or presumptuous. But the more unobtrusive this process is, the more effective it becomes. A proper self-awareness can only enrich our lives.
Rating : **** (4 of 5)

2. Film facts

- Drum - Wahrheit um jeden Preis.
- USA/South Africa/ Germany 2004
- director: Zola Maseko
- screenplay: Jason Filardi
Chris Sievernich
Dumisani Dlamini
- producer: Rudolf Wichmann
Zachary Matz
Matt Milich
Jason Filardi
- executive producers: Andreas Schmid
Andreas Grosch
- camera: Lisa Rinzler
- costumes: Pierre Viennings
- scenery: Eggbert Ketilsson
- music: Cedric Gradus Samson
- length: 97 minutes
- distributor: Zola Maseko Film
- start (Germany): 2005/12/01

Cast:

Henry Nxumalo: Taye Diggs

Jürgen Schadeberg: Gabriel Mann

Jim Bailey: Jason Flemyng

Can Themba: Tumisho Masha

Florence Nxumalo: Moshidi Motshegwa

Dara Macala: Bonnie Mbuli

Carol Shand: Tessa Jaye

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- www.drum-derfilm.de/inhalt Stand: 09.02.2007