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**Review of  
„Red Dust“**

South Africa in Films

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## Introduction: Red Dust (2004)

South Africa some years after the end of apartheid. Three people are returning to the small dusty town of Smitsrivier. From New York comes South African-born lawyer Sarah Barcant (Hilary Swank), from a Cape Town prison former deputy-policeman Dirk Hendricks (Jamie Bartlett) and from the parliament politician Alex Mpondo (Chiwetel Ejiofor). And they all will face their own past...

*Red Dust* first debuted on the cinema screens at the *Toronto International Film Festival* in September 2004. The main theme of this festival was 'South Africa: Ten Years Later'. At the festival the new arising South African cinema was celebrated and also the tenth anniversary of the new South Africa after the end of apartheid.

Ten South African made movies were shown to the audience. Three of these movies got a special screening. Thereby were *Red Dust*, the movie *Yesterday* (2004) and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004).

*Red Dust* was receiving a stunning response by the audience at this festival. Was this response justified or not?

## Background: The Truth and Reconciliation

### Commission

In 1995, one year after the end of the era of apartheid in South Africa, the Government of National Unity under president Nelson Mandela set up the *South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)*. Former government security forces wanted assurance that they would never be prosecuted for human rights abuses and violations they committed under the white rule during apartheid.

For seven years the commission travelled through South Africa to help people dealing with violence and human rights abuses that happened in the past. People committing such crimes – including torture and murder - could file an amnesty application to the *TRC*. In hearings the Amnesty Committee offered amnesty only to those who publicly confessed all their crimes. The *TRC* was the total opposite of a criminal court. If the applicant told the truth about his

crimes he would never be prosecuted for them in the future. During the *TRC* period many old wounds were reopened.

## The plot

Former Smitsrivier deputy-policeman Dirk Hendricks (Jamie Bartlett) is applying for amnesty at the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in the case of torturing Alex Mpondo (Chiwetel Ejiofor) back in 1986. After already spending some years in prison for another murder case he wants to restart his life with this plea for amnesty. As his principal witness he calls for Alex Mpondo.

Mpondo now holds a seat for the *African National Congress (ANC)* in the South African parliament. During the rule of the white minority he was an *ANC* fighter against the apartheid and the regime. He was imprisoned in March of 1986 by the Smitsrivier police for several days and was tortured by Hendricks. His friend and fellow combatant Steve Sizela was arrested alongside with him and was never seen again. To find out what happened with Steve was the only reason why Mpondo agreed to come back to Smitsrivier and to testify in front of the *TRC* Amnesty Committee. He wants to find out whether he betrayed his friend Steve or not and wants to help the parents of Steve to get assurance of the fate of their son.

Mpondo's lawyer is Sarah Barcant (Hilary Swank). She was born in this town and grew up there, later left for the United States to become a lawyer. After many years in New York Ben Hoffman (Marius Weyers) her close friend, mentor and a now retired lawyer calls her back home to represent Mpondo, and Steve Sizela as well, at the amnesty hearings. The homecomer experiences the changes taking place in her country of birth very closely.

This amnesty hearing brings back past moments of the life of all the participants. Some influential people in town even try to cover up things that happened during this time. An unveiling process begins. Some shocking facts appear and bring the truth back to the surface...

## Cutup

With his debut on the big screen director Tom Hooper delivered a worth seeing movie on a very contemporary part of the recent South African history. Nevertheless he presents the audience a well-balanced combination of courtroom-drama, South African small-town life and typical landscape of this county.

It seems that almost half or even 60 percent of the movie are set inside the courtroom with the hearings of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in Smitsrivier. We get a good overview on how the commission was build up and how it was actually working. Skillfully Hooper presents the different characters taking place in the hearing, their fates, their histories and their stories. We are taken back to the South Africa of the apartheid era and experience those times in the tellings of Alex Mpondo and Dirk Hendricks.

A number of flashbacks are used in this movie. Very often those are camera close-ups of a tortured person daubed with blood. This is also the very first scene in the movie. As we later get to know these were the imprisoned and tortured Alex Mpondo and his friend Steve Sizela. Those flashback scenes are returning during the 106 minutes of the film quite often. Mpondo is remembering more and more parts of the torture he received by Hendricks and filling long lost memory gaps of this period. So he even starts to remember what really happened to his old friend Steve Sizela.

The other half of the movie is playing outside of the courtroom. Hooper takes the audience right into the beauty of South Africa. Red Dust was shot on locations in Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape and in Johannesburg as well. Perfectly chosen landscapes are set into scene with good camera pannings.

An impressive sequence is the arrival of the long convoy of trucks and cars of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in the town at the beginning of the movie. Together with the camera shot from the far distance it seems to look like a creeping snake travelling through the red South African desert on a dusty road.

Very interesting is the presentation of the town of Smitsrivier. It seems to be a typical South African small town or larger village. Surrounded by dusty, dry and sandy deserts, farms on the outskirts of town, a township area where the black South Africans are living and the houses of the white and wealthy South

Africans in the centre of the city. At daytime it is portrait as a busy and calm town, but at nightfall trouble and flurry comes into town.

Many scenes in this movie have some kind of a reddish taint. Tom Hooper must have used some kind of a red camera filter in some scenes. In my opinion it was sometimes too much, especially dark sequences seemed even darker because of this colouring.

A very good idea of the production crew of this movie was the use of international known actors and local South African actors as cast for this film. There is a good balance between both groups. Sometimes it seemed to me that Hilary Swank was just chosen to have a draught horse for this movie in the European and American market. It is always important for the commercial and publicity of a production if they can run commercials claiming that a Academy Award winning actress can be seen in this movie. But at the end I had to give up this thoughts as all the actors in *Red Dust* did a very convincing job.

This drama could also be seen as some kind of a documentary. The human right violations of the apartheid era and the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* that followed this period could easily be part of a documentary film about the history of South Africa. But we as the audience should not forget that this movie is fictional and based on the novel by Gillian Slovo. Nevertheless the movie wants to make us aware of all those crimes and human rights violations that happened in South Africa in the past. It wants to call our attention to this sensitive matter so we can make sure that something like this never happens again in any country around the world.

*Red Dust* does not only want to make us aware of the crimes of the apartheid era but also on how the persons concerned with this got over this difficult part in their life. For many people the torturing was a great pain. At the hearings of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* they met their tantaliser again. They had to live through the process of torture once again, this time in recalling their memories to talk about it in front of the amnesty commission. That matter can easily be seen in this movie. It is hard for Alex Mpondo to see his torturer again and to go through all the details of the past.

But this meeting of Mpondo and Hendricks is one of the methods of creating the suspense in this film. Director Tom Hooper is building it up from scene to scene up to the final climax at the end. Supporting this suspense of the drama are not only the settings of the movie, the camera panning, the performance

by the actors, but also the the music. Composer Rob Lane chose songs and background music that fit well into this topic (e.g. Thina Sizwe or Senzeni Na). Most of the songs are performed by the choir of the South African Broadcasting corporation and support the movie in a dramatic way.

The movie closes with a quoted statement of the former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who always was fighting against the apartheid regime and who later was chosen by president Nelson Mandela as the chair person of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In his quote he describes the past and the present of South Africa very appropriately:

**“Having looked the beast in the eye, having asked and received forgiveness ... let us shut the door on the past, not to forget it, but to allow it not to imprison us.”**

## **Final comment**

*Red Dust* is a moving must-see film that gives a successful round up of the past and recent South African history. This educational drama takes a good look at the inhumanity of the apartheid regime, all the consequences arising out of it and the way the South African people dealt with it. The film invites us to deal with this matter in a proper way.

## The cast

Director **Tom Hooper** chose mostly actors from the United States, Great Britain and South Africa, who took part in numerous television series and movies, for his film. The most prominent one is Academy Award winning actress Hilary Swank. The few prominent actors are surrounded by a large number of local South African actors. Nevertheless all actors deliver a worth seeing job.

**Hilary Swank** as Sarah Barcant. The 32-year-old American actress already won one Academy Award for her role in the movie *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) before she took part in this production. Another Oscar followed for her acting in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). She delivers a good and authentic performance as a lawyer and fits well as an American into this South African story.

**Chiwetel Ejiofor** as Alex Mpondo. He is a 32-year-old actor with Nigerian background from Great Britain who started his acting career at the National Youth Theatre in London and later received a scholarship at the *Academy of Music and Dramatic Art* in London. His rise on the screen began with the movie *Amistad* (1997). Ejiofor gives an impressive performance as a victim of the apartheid system and as a winner of the new South Africa who struggles with the past.

**Jamie Bartlett** as Dirk Hendricks was casted only for some minor movies and television series before. The South African is convincing in his role as former police officer. While in the courtroom asking for amnesty he undergoes a true change in character: From a former hard police cop into a man who wants to carry on the truth.

**Ian Roberts** as Piet Muller. The 55-year old South African actor and musician became famous in his home country for his role in a long-running series of television commercials for an oil company and later for roles in a number of television series. In this film he has the role of the villain embedded into a character of a smart former cop and nowadays businessman who is caught up by the past.

**Marius Weyers** as Ben Hoffman. For more than three decades he is one of the best known and acclaimed South African actors. He took part in many theatre productions and in films like *Target of an Assassin* (1976), *The Gods Must Be*

*Crazy* (1980), *Gandhi* (1982) and *Farewell to the King* (1989). In *Red Dust* he plays the old tattered health impaired lawyer and friend of Sarah Barcant.

Some of the other actors taking part in minor roles and who are mostly known from television productions are *James Ngcobo* as Ezekiel, *Hlomla Dandala* as Oscar Dumasi and *Glen Gabela* as Themba.

## The Crew

Director of this movie is **Tom Hooper**. *Red Dust* was his big-screen directorial debut. Before Hooper was responsible as director for a number of television shows and series episodes (e.g. *EastEnders*) for British television. In 2006 he won the Emmy Award for the television miniseries *Elizabeth I* (2005).

**Troy Kennedy-Martin**, the veteran British scriptwriter, wrote the screenplay for the movie *Red Dust*. Starting his career for the *BBC* in the late 1950s he developed the screenplays for the long running police series *Z-Cars* (1962-1978) and for the highly regarded *BBC* television drama *Edge of Darkness* (1985).

One of the producers of *Red Dust* is **Anant Singh**. Since 1984 he produced over 50 films and is one of the pre-eminent producers in South Africa today. He was responsible for many of the South African anti-apartheid productions such as *Place of Weeping* (1984), *Sarafina!* (1992) and *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1995). Singhs expertise in media and entertainment is widely regarded around the globe.

The South African **Helena Spring** was also a producer of *Red Dust*. She works for Anant Singhs company *Videovision Entertainment* and was responsible for about sixty television projects and some twenty feature films including *Yesterday* (2004) or *The Long Run* (2000).

Two other producers of *Red Dust* are **David M. Thompson**, the head of *BBC Films*, and **Ruth Caleb**, the Executive Producer for Drama Productions at *BBC Television*.

Responsible for the music in this production was composer **Rob Lane**. His composing qualities are known from a wide range of genres, including thriller or even comedy. One of his latest works can be found in the British production *The Lives of the Saints* (2006).

## The novel and its author

*Red Dust* was the eleventh novel of South African born novelist **Gillian Slovo**. It was first published in October of 2000 by the British publishing house *Virago Press*.

Gillian Slovo was born in South Africa in 1952 as one of three daughters of the white political and anti-apartheid activists **Joe Slovo** and **Ruth First**. At the age of twelve she and her family had to leave South Africa due to political repression and moved to Great Britain. Her father was the leader of the *South African Communist Party* and a leading member of the *African National Congress (ANC)*. After 27 years in exile he returned to South Africa in 1990 and was minister in the first government of Nelson Mandela. He died in 1995 and was voted 47th in the *Top 100 Great South Africans* on *SABC* in 2004. Gillian Slovo's mother was also a journalist and political activist. She was killed by a parcel bomb sent to her office in Maputo, Mozambique in 1982.

Since 1964 Slovo lives in London with her partner and one daughter. There she works as a writer, journalist and film producer. She published her first book in 1984. It was the crime fiction novel *Morbid Symptoms*. Her memoirs *Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country* (1997) on her childhood in South Africa and her relationship to her parents became a bestseller in Britain. *Ice Road* (2004) is her latest novel.

## Film facts

### **Red Dust**

(German title: Red Dust - Die Wahrheit führt in die Freiheit)

United Kingdom / South Africa 2004

Length: 110 minutes

Production companies: British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Distant Horizon, Videovision Entertainment, Industrial Development Corporation of South Africa, BBC Films

Distributor in Germany: Koch Media Deutschland GmbH – DVD

Available on DVD since 26 May 2006