

Tsotsi

Reviewed by Christine Patterson

First premiered at the Edinburgh Film Festival in August 2005, the film *Tsotsi* provides a rich stimulus for discussions on masculinity, poverty and crime, and the challenges facing post-apartheid South Africa. Adapted for the screen by South African film director Gavin Hood, the film is based on Athol Fugard's novel *Tsotsi*. 'Tsotsi' is a term used in townships in Southern Africa to describe someone who steals, frequently with violence. A Tsotsi will strike ruthlessly and without warning motivated by a love for violence, like Butcher, one gang member in the film, or because they can, and have no reason not to. The killing of a man on the train early in the film, is exactly the sort of crime that currently terrorises South African society and is carefully captured and recreated in the film. But the film also presents in some detail the desperate social conditions in the squatter camps where the gang members live, in which residents survive on less than a dollar a day, and have daily concerns about having enough food for their families, the safety of their children, or the ever present danger of becoming swept up by the violence around them.

The background to the novel is apartheid, Sophiatown's imminent demolition, and the attempts by the authorities to suppress anti-apartheid activists by dispersing its inhabitants further from the city centre, into the South Western Township or Soweto. Apartheid meant that men frequently came on their own to seek work in the cities, and women went into domestic service, leaving their families in the 'Reserved Areas' which disrupted family lives and had disastrous consequences for children.

The legacy of such family separation continues. Save the Children currently works with children in QwaQwa, a township high up in the stunningly scenic Drakensburg mountains, which had been the 'Reserved Area' for the Sotho people. Today, there are over 200,000 people living here, in poor quality housing, with limited basic services. Unemployment stands at around 60%, and levels of alcohol and drug abuse are high. Parents still travel to Johannesburg for work, at least a four hour drive away, and children are often left for months on end with grandparents, or by themselves. For those children living in the squatter camps life is just as hard and included on the DVD is a short piece about the real lives of three boys in Soweto. It is extremely moving, and without words, speaks volumes about the reality and deprivation of these children's lives.

The film's action centres on a dark, wet night, when Tsotsi steals a car from a woman as she stands in the rain at the gate intercom to her house. She sees him at the wheel of her car and challenges him, screaming. He shoots

her and speeds away. Only later, when he stops the car, does he realise that her baby is in the back seat. He abandons the car, and takes the baby with him. By introducing a middle-class black family into the story, and making it their baby that is kidnapped, Hood is able to draw painful comparisons between Tsotsi's childhood, and that one from which he has plucked the baby. The story is not centred on a conflict between people of different races, but on the consequences of conflict and poverty.

Tsotsi is a young man without a past or an education. He viciously beats his friend, who asks him if he understand the word decency. Nor does he know his real name. Much later he meets some children living in empty sewer pipes, just as he did. A flashback reveals a violent father, and a sick mother – and his name, David. The novel allows the reader to follow David's journey as he rediscovers the part of himself that feels through his thoughts and emotions. The cinematography in the film allows the viewer to do this too, with Hood's close-up facial shots cutting to wider shots revealing the vast wasteland still separating the squatter camps from the city.

The DVD offers three endings to the film, and in doing so, Gavin Hood is allowing his audience to ask what do you want to happen to David? Is there hope in the not-so-new South Africa for him? In real life, projects like Engender Health's 'Men as Partners' project are reaching out to men like David and finding strategies to support them. The South African government has an ambitious house-building programme, to bring an end to the squatter camps, but what are the long term solutions for the cities, and for places like QwaQwa? Can that many people continue to live there? And in what conditions? The film offers a great starting point for looking at projects like this, and considers afresh discussions on gender, justice, development and sustainability.

There is an additional gem among the DVD extras in the form of the short film *The StoreKeeper*. This is an earlier, award-winning short film by Gavin Hood and really captures rural South Africa. It tragically underlines a quotation by Eglantyne Jebb, founder of Save the Children, which I frequently cite: 'Children are the first and most vulnerable victims of war', which on reflection, probably applies to the whole DVD.

Tsotsi (2006) [Film]. Hood, G. Johannesburg: The UK Film & TV Production Company PLC.

Christine Patterson is the Global Dimension Co-ordinator for Save the Children in UK, and manages global campaigns and

development education activities. Initially a drama graduate, she has taught in Zimbabwe, and as part of her current work with Save the Children visited various projects involving children and young people in South Africa last October, including the Men as Partners project in Johannesburg.