

FILM REVIEW

Vincent Moloi, *Tjovitjo*. 2017 (series). 24 minutes per episode. English (with South African indigenous languages). South Africa. Puo Pha, No price reported.

Tjovitjo is a timely filmic intervention that has, since its first screening in 2017, drawn the attention of its audiences to the implications of blackness and the struggles of ordinary people in post-apartheid South Africa. A series focused around pantsula dance, it reveals the harsh realities of blackness in the South African township, highlighting the experiences of black youths as they search for opportunities and dream of escaping the suffocating township life and its stifling poverty.

Directed by Vincent Moloi and set in the dusty township home to millions of South Africans, *Tjovitjo* tells the story of Mafred, a pantsula dancer who considers pantsula dancing a weapon, and his Tjovitjo crew dancers whom Bra Terror, with typical middle-class hypocrisy, labels low-lives. (Terror is Mafred's enemy; he opposes dance because of his bitterness and unresolved anger at his past.) Mafred leads the youths of his dance crew to fight the only way they know how, through dance, even as he grapples with the trauma of having been abandoned by his parents as a child and struggles to fend off the gangs that threaten his life. Thus, dance provides a measure of solace in the midst of personal crises.

Mafred is further devastated and broken by the loss of his beloved girlfriend, Zinhle, during a birthday outing gone wrong, in the company of prowling "blessers" (elderly men who prey on young girls, a phenomenon that haunts contemporary South Africa). Other subplots (depicting dance as a profession, abusive and dysfunctional families, unplanned pregnancy and abortion, the ambivalence and hypocrisy of the church, gang violence, and black on black hate crimes) are interwoven in an intricate narrative of black struggle for economic freedom and the self-determination that comes with it.

Moloi's casting selections are intelligent and context-conscious. Warren Masemola (Mafred), Rapulana Seiphemo (Terror), Hlengiwe Lushaba (Mmapaseka), Tony Kgoroge (Mojantji), and Soso Rungqu (Kopano), among other actors, adapt to their roles naturally, morphing expertly as they navigate intensely personal encounters. South African indigenous languages are used optimally, and the naming of characters using Sesotho, Sepedi,

Isizulu, and a hybrid with Afrikaans (Ausi Poppy) and English (Bra Terror) is deliberate. Mmapaseka's intervention when Mojantji's supposed gold thieves are caught is one instance of reality (illegal gold mining and crime in South Africa) and fiction interconnecting for a moment of suspense.

Through spectacular cinematography and choreography, *Tjovitjo* succeeds in presenting the unglamorous, often muted and unpublicized narratives of black South Africans. Pantsula's enormous role as a subculture is reinforced through effective stylistic choices, including bookending the subplots with dance. Thus, using pantsula, a profoundly South African dance form, Moloi creates a kaleidoscope of the black community's volatile condition, in which we see the arduous grind of dancers attempting to transform their lives by escaping the slum and its limitations.

Tjovitjo triumphs in both script and cinematography, making effective use of multimodal graphic effects that enhance and intensify the dominant motif: the desperate need to escape violence, hate, and socio-economic limitations and break through into something bigger and better, new frontiers of social justice, fulfilment, and human dignity—Mafred's idea of heaven. This is evident from the onset, as the film zooms in on Mafred, sitting thoughtfully, lighting a cigar. Seeing the mannequin-like figure of Jairos and the smoke billowing behind young boys marked for death with tires around their necks to facilitate their execution, the audience is enthralled by the alternate zooming in and out throughout the film, showing the pantsula dancers and their elaborate yet aggressive dance moves and intricate footwork. The images of the blue skies above the church (where black folk seek respite from the darkness of racialized poverty) and the dusty streets (where the spirited dancers express their wellspring of emotion), along with the graffiti-splattered walls and dilapidated slum dwellings, all work together to provide a remarkable picture of post-apartheid South Africa.

Closeups of dancers are contrasted with wide shots of the whole dancing crew, and alternate angles—aerial and side views—of the famed pantsula dance provide the film with a longed-for refrain amid the glaring reality of limitation, poverty, pain, love, loss, disability, and crime.

Like his protagonist, Moloi uses pantsula as a weapon, and in so doing, he exploits the multimodal and musical styles to capture the attention of the audience. There is sufficient alternation, for example, between the forlorn and tear-jerking melody accompanying Mafred's universal declaration of intent to fight the status quo and the vibrant dance tune that has Terror's wife, Queen, dancing like a professional (to her daughter Mandisa's pleasant surprise). Other scenes are similarly juxtaposed for effect, such as the heart-rending depiction of Mandisa's abortion that goes awfully wrong and Mojantji's fierce dance competition. In a life where pantsula dance is at once a weapon and a source of solace and therapy, the twists and turns of the plot, in which characters are refused the only thing that fulfills them, make for timely, relevant, entertaining, and transformative viewing. In *Tjovitjo*, Moloi does not hold back; the fear, pain, and excitement are palpable. South Africa is presented with brutal honesty, in a shocking narrative that conveys the

post-apartheid struggles of millions of people, using pantsula as a lens. Moloji's series charts a new and welcome trajectory for telling a distinctively South African story.

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