

Surfing to salvation

Sihle Xaba tells *Laurice Taitz* about his journey from lifeguard to movie star in 'Otelo Burning', the award-winning film about surfing that's creating big waves

SIHLE Xaba, star of *Otelo Burning*, is running late. But it's a glorious morning on Durban's South Beach and the photographer and I have a great vantage point — a shady bench at the Art Deco-style lifeguard station. Reason's *Walk on Water* is playing in my head, a song inspired by the film about four boys — Mandla (played by Xaba), New Year (Thomas Gumede), Otelo (Jaftha Mamabobo) and his kid brother Ntwe (Tshepang Mhlobo) — who, growing up in a violence-ravaged Durban township in the late 1980s, just want to surf.

"I feel like I can walk on water/touch the sky and go further/spread my wings because I wanna/rise above these clouds and see the whole world..."

"I was nine years old... I saw people being necklaced. Inkatha guys"

Xaba, from Lamontville about 15km from Durban, is a lifeguard for eThekweni municipality. He's the inspiration for the story behind the film. It was curiosity about why the township had produced so many of Durban's lifeguards that led director Sara Blecher to the script.

Otelo Burning is a compelling piece of storytelling: a small story set against a dramatic historical backdrop. It is also a beautiful film to look at, and one that cannot but elicit powerful emotions with its portrayal of boys whose lives are beyond anyone's control.

Among apartheid's many tragic consequences was that it broke families. The boys are largely unparented save for the occasional snack across the head — which, in the absence of loving gestures, is almost a mark of fondness. All the while, Lamontville's children run the gauntlet between armed Inkatha supporters and their UDF enemies. The township was the stuff of nightmares. And when they dream, they dream of surfing. The water is a place of freedom, their only means of escape.

Otelo Burning is shot in Zulu —

even the one whitey speaks it — with a plot so engrossing I almost had to be reminded I had seen a film in a language I don't speak. Xaba arrives, a little flustered, apologetic, and without a hint of his star status. He looks different off screen, slighter. His jaw is softer; he appears relaxed. He attributes this to his new hobby, spearfishing. He says he was inspired to change his looks for the film after reading about 50 Cent playing a college football star fighting cancer.

"On-screen I look a bit buff from fighting waves. I just had to chomp, chomp, chomp and not exercise," he laughs. His athleticism is undisputed though. Asked to bring a surfboard to the beach for a portrait shot, he comes sliding down the fireman's pole at the lifeguard station with it held casually under his arm.

We sit on the beach talking about what led to his career as a lifeguard.

"We had access to a swimming pool in Lamontville... the only one that survived the political violence. Today, still, kids are learning to swim there."

"You know people say, 'Never do anything or say anything in front of the little ones' — but all these

events I witnessed... I was nine years old... I saw people being necklaced — Inkatha guys cornered, someone being burnt alive."

He draws the geography of the township in the sand. The Inkatha versus UDF war wasn't the only one. There were gangsters to watch out for, and the inevitable standoffs against the police. What he describes is miles away from a childhood.

"Growing up, I would wake up in the township in the morning and then I'm gone. My uncle (who he lived with then) would say, 'That's how you grow stronger'. There are so many things... My son will never have that."

"I don't remember anyone asking even once, 'Where have you been?' In fact one time I remember running home, scared. I ran up the stairs — and the door slammed and I heard the lock. 'Go back where you came from,' they shouted. And I had to find shelter." He laughs incredulously.

His mother lived next to the crossing where Inkatha fighters would access the township.

"To go visit my mother, my hair would stand on end — you would be killed for a red T-shirt," which was code for Inkatha.

Gangsters fought to control the swimming pool, but there was one man who held onto it.

"His name was Stembiso Madiya. We used to call him 'sgora',



TALENT POOL: The film recreates life in Lamontville in the '80s — including swimming lessons



meaning tough guy. He would fight for the pool. His love and passion was to help kids learn to swim. You would get corporal punishment for not following his rules.

"You weren't allowed to just walk on the grass and jump in. You got a spanking and were sent home if you didn't pass his inspection." He tells it with humour.

Xaba was seven when he started swimming lessons. "It's where my lifeguarding career came from."

He is also a champion bodyboarder. He mentions how some family members didn't like the idea. It's an aspect portrayed powerfully in the film: parents teach children to fear water because of the mythical snakes that reside in it. When one of the boys says he wants to learn *esofa*, the others laugh and ask if he, "like Jesus", wants to walk on water.

Ironically, the water is the last place to fear. The real snakes lying in wait are human ones.

It's difficult to talk about Xaba's role in the film without being a spoiler, so I'll say only that at the heart of the story is an act so malevolent it left me reeling.

Those unusual times were fertile ground for the most horrific acts to flower, with malignant agendas given licence by the raging chaos.

"Shooting the film, my worst fear was that it's going to open up old wounds," says Xaba.

"Thinking about it was sad — how those people died because they believed they did the right thing. I wish young people could appreciate how South Africa has transformed," he says.

Across from us a group of black kids are playing soccer in the hazy noon light. There are kids wading into the waves.

"We never had this before — it used to be a white beach all the way to Addington, and then a coloured beach. You don't have to walk around with a dombos in your pocket. We are really privileged."

I ask how it felt to recreate that time. In our often-overwhelming present there aren't many avenues to talk about the past.

"Even I thought it's done and dusted. Life moves on. But I got a bit emotional at one stage. It made me remember going to bed in fear — thinking 'how did I survive all of this to where I am today?' For a lot of people I hope it will bring closure." The film is intensely authentic. It's made



STORY BOARD: Top, boys with their surfboards in a scene from *Otelo Burning*; above, director Sara Blecher on the set

for a South African audience but I believe it resonates far beyond us. Because it's an age-old story of children growing up too soon, and a world seen through their eyes.

It would probably ring true were it set in Brazil's favelas or LA's ghettos. Xaba attributes this to Blecher.

"Sara is the most amazing director and as we went along, we played it as close as we could to reality. She wanted to use people who were in the township back in the day."

Xaba got into acting when he auditioned for a TV series *Boy of Plenty*, set on a Durban beach.

"I have grown into it. It's not about wanting to be a celebrity. When I first auditioned, I thought I'd be cast as a stunt double — instead I got to be lead actor."

He was delayed this morning sorting out a passport renewal for a trip to Nigeria, where he'd been nominated for an African Movie Academy Award. (He didn't win on the night but the film picked up awards for cinematography, and for Mhlobo as best child actor). It's been nothing up awards from Brazil to Cape Town.

We get up to leave the beach. Tattooed across his back are the words "African built."

I walk away thinking how this place still has so many remarkable stories to tell. And I have a feeling that we'll be seeing more of Sihle Xaba.

● Download the *Otelo Burning* soundtrack mixtape for free at <http://www.oteloburning.com/mixtape>

"I wish young people could appreciate how South Africa has transformed"