

Tsotsi: Can a baby redeem a hardened thug?

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Tsotsi, written and directed by Gavin Hood, based on a novel by Athol Fugard

Tsotsi, from South Africa, has won numerous awards, including this year's Oscar for best foreign film. The work was the second from South Africa to receive a nomination in that category in as many years (following *Yesterday*, about AIDS victims).

Set in post-apartheid Soweto, the movie is based on the 1960 novel by Athol Fugard (born 1932), a liberal critic and playwright. Fugard's plays, for which he is best known and celebrated, span a period of 50 years and highlight the destructive impact of apartheid segregation on human relations. His plays include *The Blood Knot*, *Lena and Boesman* and, in the more recent period, *Sorrows and Rejoicing*. *Tsotsi* is his only novel.

Fugard was an opponent of apartheid rule, and his plays provide an insight into the tragic consequences of institutionalized segregation. In the 1960s, the infamous "Pass Laws" required blacks to carry passbooks (identity documents). The violation of this law was the occasion for arrests, deportation and exile, and led to mass protests beginning with Sharpeville in the 1960s and through the end of apartheid rule. The "Pass Laws" were repealed in 1986.

Gavin Hood chose to contemporize Fugard's story set during this harsh period, but Hood's contemporary South Africa is even more socially polarized, and the majority of the population is actually worse off now than in the country depicted by Fugard. Recent figures published by the South African Institute of Black Economic Empowerment demonstrated that the living conditions of the majority of South Africans have worsened since the ending of apartheid. After 12 years of life under the African National Congress (ANC), the capitalist free-market policies pursued by Mandela and intensified by the present regime of Thabo Mbeki have helped create something of a social catastrophe.

To review some of the main indices of the post-apartheid social disaster: the proportion of black households with running water fell by 10 percent in the last decade, and even where available, the privatized water companies often cut off or restrict supplies to those who cannot pay. Also, the number of Africans living in absolute poverty rose from 16 million in 1996 to 22 million in 2004, an increase of 39 percent. To make matters even worse, more than 6 million people are living with

HIV, and less than 1 percent of those who need it have access to treatment under the government's antiretroviral plan.

This is the social powderkeg Hood sets out to explore in *Tsotsi*. Although he contrasts the poverty in the townships with conditions of life for the more privileged layer of upper middle class blacks, who live in suburban, gated communities, with a fair degree of sensitivity, he falls short of providing the kind of social and political critique that Fugard was known for.

The story centers on Tsotsi, played convincingly by a local youth, Presley Chweneyagae. Translated, the character's name literally means "thug," a nickname he has earned through his brutality as a gang leader in a Soweto shantytown. Here, the 19-year-old has his "own place," a corrugated iron shack, on top of another ramshackle dwelling.

The pervasive brutality of the township is graphically displayed when Tsotsi, "Teacher Boy" (Mothusi Magano) and two other fellow gangsters (probably still in their teens) stab and rob an older worker who just received his pay packet on a crowded commuter train, with nobody noticing (or caring?). This "quick and silent" attack, edited skillfully, captures in a few intense moments the violence and desperation that breeds it—the quick succession of close-ups of "killer" looks, alternated with the victim's bewilderment and terror as an ice-pick is lodged into his belly, is very chilling.

It is against this poverty-induced brutality that Tsotsi has to redeem himself in a place that seems to offer no such way out. Or does it? It doesn't take long for such an alternative, namely "decency," to emerge in a somewhat didactic manner.

"Teacher Boy," the only gangster still in a possession of a conscience, berates Tsotsi for the callous murder of the man they just robbed. The moralizing tirades about decency trigger a flood of very ugly and repressed emotions in Tsotsi, who beats his friend to a pulp. This irrational and vicious outburst defines Tsotsi's depraved state of mind. But what the film doesn't deal with adequately is the social and historical forces that shaped it.

The frequent closeups of angst-ridden Tsotsi indicate the irrepressible rage beneath the surface, and the actor does well to keep up this intensity. But the limits of this strategy make themselves felt after he starts down his road to redemption. This process begins when he discovers, much to his shock, a baby boy in the back seat of a BMW, stolen after Tsotsi shoots the mother as she is trying to enter her house.

Can a baby redeem a hardened thug? On the answer to this

question hinges the whole story. One should not reject out of principle the power of a newborn to humanize a hardened thug in a serious drama. The problem is not so much an unrealistic plot in itself, but that the transformation of Tsotsi from a ruthless killer to a conscience-stricken youth is presented solely in terms of his contact with a baby. The sudden awakening of an individual conscience—is this the solution to the South African misery?

Tsotsi becomes obsessed with caring for and keeping the baby as his way out of a rotten life. Even a young single mother, Miriam (Terry Pheto), whom he forces to breastfeed the infant at gunpoint, is not allowed to have him. Gradually, Miriam develops genuine affection for the baby, and possibly for Tsotsi himself.

To provide a psychological subtext to Tsotsi's suppressed humanity, Hood resorts to sentimental flashbacks. The presence of a brutal father, who breaks the back of his son's dog and forbids him from seeing his AIDS-ridden mother, is meant to explain Tsotsi's subsequent descent into gangsterism. This seems rather contrived and simplistic. What the film lacks most of all is a sense of history, a glimpse of the social reality that underlies Tsotsi's broken home. In other words, the narrative development of Tsotsi's character lags behind the visual and aural depictions of the social crisis underlying his mental state.

The viewers are shown countless square miles of the township through numerous wide, sunset/sunrise-enriched shots by the cinematographer Lance Gewer. The bombastic local Kweto soundtrack also expresses the harsh conditions. While the film evinces genuine sympathy for South Africa's victims of poverty, one does not come away from the film with any sense that the townships produced not only criminal elements, but also brave and heroic fighters against those conditions.

Despite its narrative limitations, at times the power of the film's images itself manages to sensitize one to the present state of life in South Africa. There are numerous instances of this. For example, when two detectives, standing next to the stolen and stripped BMW overlooking the vast shantytown, try to figure out a way to locate the carjacker (Tsotsi), one is struck, as they are, by the enormity of the task. The township is so vast that, even at a great distance, it still fills the entire wide panoramic view. In one simple shot, we are confronted with a stark reality of the post-apartheid South Africa and its failure to offer civilized living conditions for its poor majority.

In the shantytown of over a million "nobodies" (a detective's description of its inhabitants), the cops have not worked out a strategy to locate a baby-snatcher and killer. If not for the fact that the missing black baby belongs to rich parents, one gets a sense that the cops would not even bother to enter this sea of shacks. As one of them tells the outraged father, they cannot even locate stolen cars, let alone people in that mayhem. This is a simple and powerful sequence.

Tsotsi is also engaging and moving as a personal drama and thriller, but that is largely in spite and not because of Hood's

approach to the issues of historical truth and social reality. Fugard's original story made for a rich and moving novel, largely because it exposed the essential character of apartheid. Undoubtedly, there are inherent difficulties in adapting or reproducing the nuances of a novel to film, but Tsotsi's struggle against his oppression needs to be inspired by much more than a lovable baby, as effective a dramatic device as that is. This is a social and not individual question.

While Fugard's liberal and humanist portrayal of Tsotsi had a sharp critical edge in the context of apartheid oppression, Hood's conventional drama is far safer, and it amounts to a moral appeal to the post-apartheid ANC regime. One common feature of both the novel and the film is the shantytown. The conditions are as desperate now, if not more so, than they were in the period dramatized by Fugard. So what has changed under the ANC? Apart from more poverty, black cops work alongside the whites, and there has been the emergence of a black petty bourgeoisie. This is shown, but hardly explored, in the film.

The ending is symptomatic of Hood's attitude to the existing social order. While attempting to return the baby to his parents' gated mansion, Tsotsi inadvertently triggers a quick response by a police unit, who surround him on the street in front of these gates, ready to spray him with bullets. Tsotsi finally comes face to face with symbols of his social and political oppression (petty bourgeois family hiding behind the electronic gate and the cops protecting them from the likes of him). We don't learn of his subsequent fate as the screen blacks out, but this conclusion reflects a more ambivalent attitude toward existing conditions than Fugard displayed in his novel, in which both Tsotsi and the baby die after his shack is bulldozed to the ground.

While suspense, realistic cinematography and a powerful dramatic catalyst (the infant) may be enough to thrill and evoke empathy for Tsotsi, the film falls short of delivering the critical punch Fugard's novel achieved 45 years ago. While Fugard's liberal perspective limited him, his depiction of social life in the townships and the impact of its harsh laws had a genuine richness that Hood's film sorely lacks.



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