

Catch a Fire: A story of struggle against apartheid, but not the whole story

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Catch a Fire, directed by Phillip Noyce; screenplay by Shawn Slovo

Shawn Slovo, daughter of Joe Slovo, the deceased leader of the South African Communist Party and founder of the armed wing of the African National Congress, was told by her father that if she were ever inclined to write about the country's turbulent times in the 1980s she might tell the story of Patrick Chamusso.

Two weeks after Chamusso's release from Robben Island prison in South Africa in 1993, Ms. Slovo met with the ANC fighter in Johannesburg and recorded his remembrances. This was the genesis for the screenplay of Australian filmmaker Phillip Noyce's new movie, *Catch a Fire*. Noyce is the director of a number of interesting works, such as *The Quiet American* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

In Noyce's film, Patrick Chamusso (Derek Luke), who is black, works as a foreman at the Secunda oil refinery in the 1970s, a facility crucial to the apartheid government. While international boycotts were damaging the racist regime, the film's production notes inform us, the coal-to-oil refinery was a symbol of the wealth and relative self-sufficiency of white South Africa.

For his personal betterment and that of his family—his wife Precious (Bonnie Mbuli) and two young daughters—Chamusso avoids contact with the ANC guerillas. As a supervisor, he tries to neutralize and diffuse the brewing discontent of the refinery workers, a service rewarded by his employers with such perks as a company bungalow and car. Charming and affable, Patrick is beloved in his community and coaches soccer for its youth, another effort that offers an opportunity to keep the lid on social tensions.

In May 1980, the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) ["Spear of the Nation," founded in 1961], bombs the Secunda plant in the most effective act of sabotage in the organization's history. In retaliation, the police under Colonel Nic Vos (Tim Robbins) arrest Chamusso, suspecting him of involvement in the attack due to his knowledge of the installation.

Protesting his innocence, Patrick is detained and tortured. Between bouts of persecuting his prisoner, Vos makes attempts at civility, all the better to extract information concerning the racist state's political nemesis. Only when his wife Precious is arrested and brutalized does Patrick decide to join the rebellion against the apartheid regime and its fascistic guardians like Vos.

Leaving Precious in the dark about his mission, Patrick abandons his family and illegally enters Mozambique where he begins training with the ANC under MK commander Joe Slovo, one of the few white leaders of the force. Slovo is in charge of Special Ops, a unit set up to engineer acts of military propaganda designed to demoralize the white oppressors. Patrick (codenamed "Hotstuff") prepares to become a one-man assault team for a second hit on the Secunda refinery.

During her husband's absence, Precious has been lied to and cruelly manipulated by Vos. Forced out of her house, she goes into service for a condescending Afrikaner woman. Consumed by feelings of humiliation

and betrayal, she fingers Patrick to the police, whereupon he is caught, tortured and imprisoned for nine months. Eventually tried in 1982 for contravening the Terrorism Act, Patrick is sentenced to 24 years in prison. After 10 years on Robben Island, Chamusso is amnestied and released, along with all political prisoners, through a 1991 ANC-government arrangement.

In rendering Patrick Chamusso's transformation from servile careerist to ANC activist, *Catch a Fire* presents a fascinating and vivid tale. Noyce and Shawn Slovo convincingly treat the details of this political and moral evolution as an important historical episode. (One of the film's subtexts is its parallel to the present situation in Iraq and Afghanistan—i.e., the torture of innocent people ultimately rebounds against the oppressor, as the victims are likely to become enemies of the given regime or military force.)

Unfortunately, the film provides only a fleeting glance of South Africa's increasingly restive black working class. *Catch a Fire* is mainly preoccupied with the process of how a somewhat privileged, apolitical man is inadvertently thrust into the arms of a militant anti-government movement, developing as he does the strength to make the necessary sacrifices. The talented Luke (Antwone Fisher) as Patrick and newcomer Mbuli as Precious bring intelligence and grace to the project.

"Why had Patrick felt that he had to leave a relatively comfortable life, cross the border to Mozambique, and become an ANC soldier?" asks Noyce in the production notes. "Why did he feel that he had to take up arms and fight back against the apartheid regime? What was it like training to be a soldier in Angola? How did he break into the Secunda refinery? What happened to him when he was imprisoned on Robben Island? These were the details I had to know." The director succeeds in answering dramatically a number of the questions he set himself.

It is perhaps noteworthy that Noyce has chosen in several films, including *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Quiet American* and this new work, to consider the response of ordinary people thrown into conflict with the authorities. Intelligent, even crafty, morally and physically persevering, the apparently overmatched individuals often outwit the powers that be.

To his credit, the director reaches beyond stereotype in Vos's characterization, allowing Robbins to inject texture and complexity into the role. The colonel is a brutal defender of apartheid who simultaneously recognizes that it is a doomed enterprise. Conscious that he may be on the losing side, Vos is alert to the possibility that his prisoner might some day be his jailer.

This is expressed in many subtle ways—a look or corresponding body language—but most concretely when Vos has Patrick brought to his house and unshackled for a family dinner. While still a ploy to obtain information, the gesture is on some level an attempt at conciliation and a manifestation, however limited, of respect. But the social chasm between the adversaries is too deep and too wide. Robbins, a better actor than director (or politician), gives Vos an impressive emotional range, avoiding the pitfall of oversimplification.

Along with a brief history of apartheid and the ANC, the film's production notes provide an insight into Vos's psyche: "Afrikaner identity had long been characterized by the frontier/pioneering spirit of the Great Trekkers and their—mostly farming—descendants, who had been brutalized and oppressed by the British during the Boer Wars.

"By the mid-20th century, though, this identity had hardened into a conviction that their survival depended on self-reliance and isolation. It found expression in a form of nationalism that was inward-looking, defensive, and profoundly conservative. At its heart was a fear that their survival in South Africa would always be precarious, given that blacks outnumbered whites so dramatically."

Noyce, who began his Hollywood career rather unpromisingly with a number of action pictures (including two films based on awful Tom Clancy novels), works in a thoughtful and careful fashion. He creates crisp and clear images. The tension in *Catch a Fire* is genuine, and the suffering and inner conflicts of the protagonists convey themselves to the spectator.

In an interview with *moviehole.net*, Noyce, born in 1950, acknowledged that after having proven himself in the 1990s, he "reached a point where I decided that I wanted to make films that told stories that I felt were really important as opposed to the stories that the 'system' wanted to make. You still have to go through that system, and it is like running the gauntlet, but of course the lower the budget the more freedom you have. I just made a decision with *Rabbit-Proof Fence* that I was going to try and make films not that were bigger and therefore better, but were as small as they needed to be in order to get made."

Scheduled to film *Dirt Music* by Australian novelist Tim Winton and still attached to the idea of adapting to film American writer Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Noyce remains one of the most interesting commercial film directors currently working.

There is no reason whatsoever for doubting the filmmaker's sincerity when he enumerates his motives, as indicated above, for making *Catch a Fire* ("Why had Patrick felt that he had to leave a relatively comfortable life ...," etc.). Nonetheless, in making this "story of an ordinary person who does something extraordinary," in his own words, Noyce has, perhaps half-consciously, adopted an attitude toward quite specific and loaded political and historical issues, and his work has to be judged accordingly.

From this point of view, *Catch a Fire* is an unqualified endorsement of the ANC, Slovo and the South African Communist Party. In an interview with the *Democracy Now!* radio program, as part of a publicity campaign for Noyce's film, Robyn Slovo (sister of Shawn Slovo and producer of the film) argued that South Africa represented a model of how a country might "achieve, basically, democracy" without producing "rivers of blood." She went on, "It came from a ... police state, virtually, to really [a] shining example of how democracy can work."

Tim Robbins, on the same program, asserted that the film presents "the true story of South Africa, the true story of Mandela, the idea that you can come out of years and years of oppression and years and years of internment with a sense of forgiveness." According to Robbins, the ANC leadership had sufficient vision "to say, 'No, we're moving forward. We're not going to look backwards. We're not going to be one of these countries that is going to waste years and years of time with retribution, with trials, with tribunals, with people being drug out of their houses in the middle of the night being beaten in the streets. That's not going to happen here.'"

The question is not of course 'forgiveness versus retribution,' but the social character of the new South African regime and the conditions for masses of people. "Democracy" is more than the absence of discrimination and racism, even of the most monstrous variety, and the right to cast a ballot every few years. Does the South African working class now exercise any real control over the functioning of economic and social life? Does the replacement of a white ruling elite by a

predominantly black one alter fundamental realities—poverty, social inequality, disease and other social ills—for the vast majority of the population? Is it meaningful to speak of "independence" and "liberation" when South Africans, like people everywhere else, remain at the mercy of transnational corporations that scour the globe in search of raw materials and cheap labor?

Approaching the matter quite objectively, one should perhaps consider why Joe Slovo suggested the Patrick Chamusso story as his artistic legacy. It's a moving drama, without question, but it's also the account of someone who belonged to a relatively advantaged layer of the black working population, for whom the conditions of apartheid proved an obstacle in the path of attaining some degree of wealth and position (Robbins says "He was a person that was interested simply in raising his family and towing the line and moving up the ladder and getting more and more money").

Since taking office, the ANC policy of "black empowerment" has enriched a tiny minority of black businessmen and government officials at the expense of the South African working class. Is the film, unwittingly or not, a reminder, in the face of increasing economic hardship, to certain elements of the black population what they owe to the ANC and its struggle? (The fact that Chamusso did not end up a callous petty bourgeois doesn't alter the facts of the case.)

Throughout his imprisonment, ANC leader Nelson Mandela argued that the rationale for the organization's existence was to allow the black middle class access to capital, holding the position on Robben Island in the late 1970s that the ANC's Freedom Charter was drafted to establish a bourgeois democracy, not to create socialism. Ultimately, it was principally the insurgency of the black working class and youth, not the operations of the ANC, as the film suggests, that forced the apartheid government of F.W. de Klerk to broker a deal with the bourgeois nationalists in 1991. In 1994, Mandela came to power as the head of the "National Unity" government, consisting of the ANC, de Klerk's National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party; Slovo became minister of housing.

In the course of the upheavals, it fell to Slovo and the South African Communist Party to provide Mandela and the ANC with left credentials. Meanwhile the South African Stalinists remained firmly committed to the two-stage theory of revolution in the colonial countries, according to which the working class had to subordinate itself to the national capitalist class in the "first stage" of the revolution—establishing independence and bourgeois democracy—and postpone the assertion of its own class interests to some distant time in the future (in reality, never).

While Slovo and his wife Ruth First, who was assassinated by the South African Bureau of State Security in 1982, were undoubtedly courageous individuals, their credibility as "Communists" helped the ANC assert its leadership over the working class in the townships, particularly after the Soweto uprising in 1976.

Further, the CP used its positions in the trade union bureaucracy to straight-jacket working class militancy, limiting it to political protests acceptable to the religious and liberal opponents of apartheid.

Catch a Fire, despite its artistic merits, promotes the illusion, articulated by Noyce in an interview, that the ANC set the stage for a post-apartheid South Africa, in which everyone is "just looking forward to an extraordinary bright future." At this point, only an insulated, upwardly-mobile elite can look to the future with such optimism.



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