Filmmaker Oliver Hermanus discusses Beauty

Richard Phillips
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South African writer-director Oliver Hermanus spoke about *Beauty* (*Skoonheid* in Afrikaans), his second feature film, with the *World Socialist Web Site* during this year's Sydney Film Festival.

Beauty centres on Francois (Deon Lotz), a middle-aged Afrikaans businessman, whose life has become a lie. Married with adult daughters, he is attracted to men but cannot publicly acknowledge it and is deeply unhappy. He engages in secret homosexual liaisons with other men also in denial. Mesmerised by Christian (Charlie Keegan), the son of an old friend, Francois becomes dangerously obsessed with the handsome young man. (See: "Sydney Film Festival 2012—Part 1: To shine a light on reality or flee from it")

Hermanus, 29, began his career as a press photographer, studied at the University of Cape Town and then the London Film School. *Shirley Adams* (2009), his first feature, is about a poverty-stricken woman from Mitchell's Plain in Cape Town and her desperate but determined efforts to care for her disabled son.

Richard Phillips: *Beauty* has a remarkable opening—the wedding sequence cinematography—and one that is rather disarming compared to what then gradually unfolds. How did you decide on the story's basic premise?

Oliver Hermanus: It sort of ran away with me to some extent. I didn't set out to make a film about repressed homosexuality, but wanted to make a movie about beauty and the relationship between the haves and the have nots.

If you see beauty as a currency in the world there are some people who have it and definitely use it to get them through life or to gain access to things and there are others that can't. In a strange way Francois, whether physically or internally, is outside the world of beauty and beautiful people.

The purpose of the story was to chronicle a man who is slowly poisoned by his desire or obsessive pursuit of a beautiful object. The other elements fell into place in trying to reinforce that in terms of where he lives and the homosexual element.

Christian, for example, is someone aware of his engaging powers over people, including Francois. He may not be sexually attracted to men but uses his youthful charms to manipulate. Francois, while financially comfortable, cannot use his physical appearance in this way.

RP: Why did you use Bloemfontein as the setting?

OH: I chose it because I assumed it was the sort of South African city where I'd never want to spend my life. It's a bastion of Afrikaanerdom and very segregated. It was the capital of the Orange Free State in the first republic of South Africa and was where the British first established concentration camps to lock up Afrikaners during the Boer War.

RP: There are some references in the film to the African National Congress government. At some point one of the characters says, "They are forcing us to be racist." Could you elaborate on this?

OH: These are very common sentiments amongst conservative white South Africans. In their private lives Francois and the milieu he's from often discuss amongst themselves whether or not the apartheid system was better, safer for them. They may appreciate some of the new political changes, but at the end of the day they would choose the old system because it guaranteed them economic strength and security.

RP: Francois is in a permanent state of repressed internal agitation and yet at first the film unfolds at a fairly leisurely speed.

OH: Some would say the pacing is luxurious.

RP: Was this tempo worked out in advance or during shooting?

OH: I'd say during the shoot. If the actor was less interesting to me I might have moved the pace along a bit more, but he was very interesting to watch in many sequences that had been off the page. He would run through the lines, but then keep generating new ones so it ends up being an emotional process in real time.

We worked extensively to root the character in a reality that we could both reference and there was never a point where it was felt that this character was out of reference. We all feel that we know someone like this—someone like Francois who has extreme self-restraint and guardedness, but at the same time is a ticking emotional time bomb.

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Many men of Francois' upbringing and social background are still in a segregated sort of world. He lives in a white suburb in Bloemfontein, all his friends are white, and they all have nice houses. The only black people that they engage with are either working for them or in the local shops or petrol stations. This layer has not integrated at all and yet when they open the newspapers the country is being run by a majority black government.

As the years have gone by they've become increasingly fearful of extremes and that they may lose their wealth, their land or their rights. Francois is at that point in his life where he really feels—for all sorts of irrational reasons—that he needs to be as vigilant and in control in order to defend against such an outcome. His friends from Cape Town—Christian's parents—are slightly more relaxed because they're in a bigger city and they've probably integrated a bit more.

At the same time, Francois is determined that his daughter should keep Afrikaans as her first language, whereas Christian's family are slightly different. This fear factor is definitely something that South Africans relate to and across all races. Of course in South Africa you barely have to scrape the surface to encounter the fragility of race relations.

RP: Your first film—*Shirley Adams*—deals with an entirely different social layer.

OH: It's the same country but if you compare the two realities—the cities, the lives—these characters are worlds apart. Shirley Adams never really leaves the poor district in which she lives and everyone around her is in a similar position. Francois lives in an entirely different world and is definitely a product of the old system.

RP: Shirley Adams is scratching every day just to keep herself and her son alive.

OH: Yes, and this is the reality for the majority of the country. Francois is not part of that. He doesn't have to deal with the inadequate health system, the lack of deliverables for disabilities and the general poverty. These are obviously issues that resonate with a large portion of the world because most people face these sorts of conditions. Francois is comfortably middle class, but he is also an Afrikaner and a minority in his own country.

RP: The film shows the complexities of this man. You are repulsed by him and at the same time, he is a tragic figure.

OH: People, whether good or bad, are complex and I'm very interested is exploring these contradictions. I'm not excusing Francois' actions but it is possible to submerge yourself in his reality and, without justifying his actions, understand why he does what he does.

Shirley Adams is the sort of person who never thought that she could steal from anyone but circumstances push her to that point. It's similar with Francois. He is pushed to breaking point because of what he is and where he comes from.

RP: Do you think you could have made both these films without the particular actors you chose?

OH: After securing film finance there's always a bit of panic about whether you're going to be able to find the right actors. In South Africa very few actors have had a lot of film experience. I've also been trained in a particular way and wanted lead actors with endurance and able to survive my long takes. Deon Lotz [*Beauty*] and Denise Newman [*Shirley Adams*] had to be on the set every day because the films hinged on them completely. I was very fortunate because they were prepared to trust me and never said no, even though I constantly asked for more.

RP: What's been the response to both your films in South Africa?

OH: *Beauty* had a much bigger impact because of the publicity from the Cannes Film Festival. *Shirley Adams* was a bit of a sleeper and very much under the radar. Many people have discovered it, in fact, because of *Beauty*. In some ways *Beauty* has become notorious in South Africa. People agree that it is an extremely challenging and tough film and have reacted either favourably or are shocked.

Shirley Adams demanded audiences immerse themselves with the claustrophobia of her life but she was a much more sympathetic character. She was easier to accept but that's why I wanted to take a different approach with *Beauty*. In terms of camera work and editing I wanted *Beauty* to be very smooth and clear but the central character much more challenging, more difficult. I felt it was important to put my energies into developing difficult and more complex characters.

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