

# Potent City Of Violence pulls all the right punches



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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City of Violence is a powerful exploration of the human condition in Cape Town, with French director Jerome Salle taking us into the underbelly of society. Salle's magnificent vision shows how an outsider's view allows us to take a really close look at the world we live in, and turn the world we think we know inside out and upside down.

It's a bleak-and-dark journey into a life-affirming story that captures the essence of two generations of South Africans: a heated younger generation lost in a world that has lost its meaning and run out of control, and a tranquil older generation that quietly diffuses the anger with rational sensibility and calm demeanour.

Set in a South Africa still haunted by apartheid, City of Violence (also known as Zulu) features superb performances from Orlando Bloom as a hard-headed young policeman, and Forest Whitaker as his mentor, who are tracking the killer of a teenage girl. From the townships of Cape Town to the luxurious seafront villas, the ruthless-and-bloody investigation transforms the two men's lives, forcing them to confront their inner demons. It is Bloom's personal connection to the character that he plays that truly elevates his performance and is far removed from his role in films like Lord of The Rings.



## Anti-apartheid militant

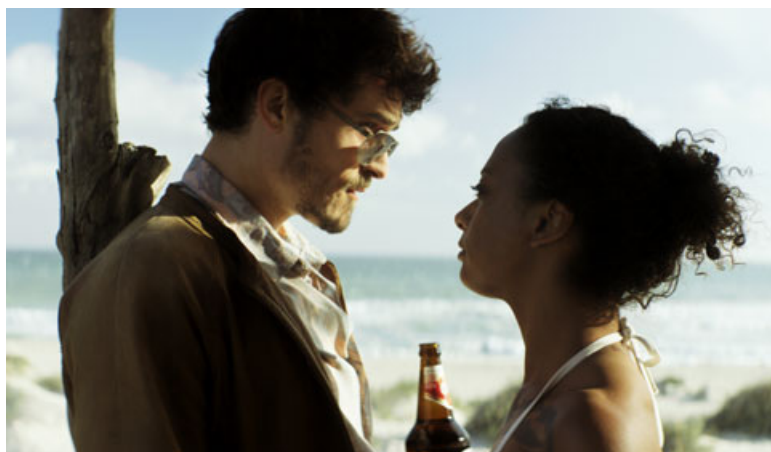
Bloom has close family ties with South Africa. His father, Harry Bloom, who wasn't in fact his biological father, was a well-known South African journalist and writer, and an anti-apartheid militant. He had to flee the country and that's how he came to meet Orlando's mother in England.

There are equally memorable performances from the South African cast, with Tinarie van Wyk-Loots in top form as a woman whose life is destroyed by senseless violence; Regardt van den Bergh is outstanding as the corrupted villain, and Denise Newman is absolutely sensational as the inebriated shebeen queen.

In conversation with Salle last week, his passion for the film is clear, as well as his intention to deliver a film that shows forgiveness. "What I mainly wanted to develop was the idea of forgiveness, which runs through the whole film, he said.

Using a quote from Desmond Tutu: "There's no future without forgiveness," Salle succeeds admirably in delivering a film that shows how important it is to have compassion and understanding.

Says Salle, who made a point of not exploiting the controversial subject matter and issues related to a crime-ridden city: "The film deals with the difficulty and the necessity of forgiving to move forward, whether for an individual, a community or a whole country."



## Never exploits violence

Although the story deals with revenge, it never becomes a senseless film that exploits violence.

"I have a problem with the idea of glorifying this urge. The greatest classic in the field of vengeance stories is *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and that happens to be my favourite book. But in Dumas' novel, the ending makes you feel the absurdity, the pointlessness of vengeance. That's not the case in most 'revenge movies', far from it. So I liked the idea of making a thriller that runs counter to this sub-genre and the philosophy that goes with it."

For him, South Africa is the perfect backdrop for talking about forgiveness.

"At the end of apartheid, the government set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to avoid a spiral of vengeance, and to allow the persecutors to ask forgiveness from their victims. They would then benefit from an amnesty, being pardoned. This kind of peaceful reconciliation process has since been copied in other countries in Africa and Latin America."

It was equally important for Salle to make a film "that a South African audience would view as a South African film".

"I think *City of Violence* is a genuine South African film: there were only five French people in the crew. All the rest of the crew and cast, apart from Forest and Orlando, were South African. I was clear from the start, telling them I'd come to make a film about them, their country, and that I was approaching the job with great humility, and that I needed them in order to stay close to the reality of this very complex country."

*City of Violence* has impacted on the lives of local actors: Conrad Kemp, who plays Dan Fletcher got an opportunity to appear on Broadway with Orlando Bloom in *Romeo and Juliet*; and Randall Majiet, a former gang member who was in

rehab when he was spotted by one of the casting scouts, turned his life around and now has an agent looking after his acting career.



## Based on Zulu

City of Violence is based on Caryl Férey's novel Zulu, and the screenplay was co-written by Salle and Julien Rappeneau, who had to squeeze a 450-page book miraculously into a two-hour film.

Before starting to write, Salle and Rappeneau read lots of other books and articles about South Africa, and watched some documentaries and programmes. After that, their preliminary location scouting allowed them to check if the story they were telling was coherent with the atmosphere, the local culture, the social relations, and the geography of the places.

Says Rappeneau: "The main challenge was the book's richness: 450 pages! A book with a complex plot, lots of secondary characters and evocations of these characters' past. Jérôme and I started with the novel's two heroes, their personalities, and their issues, whilst transposing them to a cinematographic narration. At one point, once we'd decided on the main theme that we were interested in - that of forgiveness - we had to close the novel and project ourselves into the film. That does involve making choices, abandoning certain characters and certain sub-plots, to retain the essential whilst respecting the spirit of the book, its tone, and also the room it leaves for the story of South Africa and its current socio-political reality."

For Salle it has always been important for him to co-write the screenplay. "When I start shooting the film the story already lives in my head," he says. "The movie has to live inside you. You have to feel it. When it is inside you, you can be instinctive when shooting the film."

## Harsh and rugged

City of Violence is brilliantly lensed by Denis Rouden and realised by set designer Laurent Ott, meticulously capturing Salle's vision and his desire to "make a gritty film".

"I didn't want it to look beautiful and cleanly done, but harsh and rugged, in keeping with the violence of the story," says Salle. "I also had to strive for simplicity and realism. But there's not just hand-held work in the film, far from it. In fact, the whole toolbox is in there, all the classic toys: Steadicam, crane, helicopter, etc. But I think, and I hope, that it's never flashy. It's always in the service of the narrative. This story was very complex to recount, so from beginning to end I was obsessed by the narrative."

If you are looking for a tense-and-thrilling human drama, City of Violence offers captivating and intriguing entertainment with bite.

For more information on City Of Violence and other new releases, go to [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

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