

SundanceTV Shorts winner recognised globally for zombie film

 By Jessica Tennant

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On her return from the Sundance Film Festival in London, where she premiered her award-winning short film *Life's a Drag*, Johannesburg-based filmmaker Kate D'hotman tells us more about the film, what winning the jury prize at the second annual SundanceTV Shorts Competition for South Africa meant to her and what she learnt through the experience.



Mike Plante, Kate D'hotman and Damon Berry at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival in London.

"I made *Life's a Drag* [video below] because I wanted to have some fun and flex my directing muscles again, and hoped that we could enter it into a few festivals to get some exposure in the lead-up to my first feature, which I hope to shoot later this year, but I certainly didn't expect to win such a prestigious award! It's a huge honour and I'm so glad that the film has been so well received. The team all worked really hard, on a less than a shoestring budget and I couldn't be prouder of everyone."

D'hotman continues to say that this serves as a major validation. "Sundance is a world-renowned name and it means a great deal to me that both the local and international jurors saw something special in my film. I hope this is just the beginning; it's always been my dream to tell stories, so now with this award under my belt, I hope to not only be able to take *Life's a Drag* around the international festival circuit, but to use it as a launching pad for my career as a filmmaker.

"I have some great projects in the pipeline that are just looking for the right partners and platforms, so I'm very optimistic about the future."

She goes on...

■ Tell us a bit more about the experience; what you learnt; your key takeaway?

I learnt that people are looking for unique voices, not necessarily spectacular cinematic artworks or dark-night-of-the-soul works of art ... at least not yet.

Industry players can see potential, and that gives me hope because I know I still have a lot to learn and I'm excited about developing my visual style and cinematic language.

Well, first of all, don't take yourself too damn seriously! I met some amazing filmmakers who have won all these awards and have made these masterpieces, and they were just the most down-to-earth, relatable people who saw me as a peer. I think we spend so much time second-guessing ourselves; we are our own worst critics, and the truth is, we all have something unique and beautiful to offer the world, so we just have to focus on the work and get out of our own way.

The other thing is that I approached the Sundance Film Festival: London very differently to the Berlin Film Festival in 2018. Last year I barrelled in, guns blazing, intent on scoring a big investor, finding an agent or landing an impressive distribution deal. I learned (after the fact) that real networking is about quality, not quantity. This business is about relationships, and despite appearances, the big-shots are just people who would appreciate an authentic human connection far more than a drive-by 'what-can-you-do-for-me' approach. So, at the Sundance Festival in London, I just relaxed into it and let conversations happen naturally, and spent quality time with a handful of people. That way, I not only made more real and lasting connections, I also had more fun!



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■ What inspired you to create the film, and what do you think made it stand out?

The story was inspired by a photo of Adrian Brody in *The Pianist*. I looked at him and I thought, "Man, he'd make a really good zombie." And the idea kind of grew from there.

Life's a Drag was one of those scripts that just came to me – the film played out like a movie in my head and I just wrote it down. Those moments are really magical because it's when true inspiration is in the driver's seat and you're not a slave to film theory or story structure or research or anything else. So, when people ask me, "What happens next?" I smile and tell them, "I don't know, but I can't wait to find out!"

I suppose what made the film stand out was that it wasn't trying to be something it wasn't; it was just fun. I didn't worry too much about what people might think about it, I just wrote something that I enjoyed and found a bunch of other people who also thought it was funny. So, we all got together and made this little film for the pure love of storytelling and had a great laugh while doing it. And I think that translates onto the screen.

Either that, or it was just zombies in business suits with data entry jobs that got the judges' attention. I don't know!

■ Why short form?

Well, the general advice I've heard through the years is: make a short (or lots of them) and enter lots of festivals, maybe win some awards and perhaps get noticed. That's how a few directors have gotten their break, by using their short films as a kind of visual 'business card,' a way of saying, "This is who I am and what I'm about."

“ You can't just sit around in your tracksuit pants watching Wes Anderson films, complaining about how no one recognises your talent and won't give you R10 million to make a feature film. You've got to actually bite the bullet and make something. Make a lot of somethings if you can. Call in favours, max out your credit cards, make a plan, but make

films! You can't call yourself a filmmaker if you're not making actual films. ”

But also, this story just worked as a short. It wasn't like so many other ideas I've had, which are really feature films masquerading as shorts, trying desperately to tell a big story in a small amount of time. *Life's a Drag* tells the story of one guy, in the space of a couple of hours, on a day that just happens to be the biggest day of his afterlife!

■ **Comment on the current state of film in SA.**

I'm excited by what feels like a new energy in our local film industry – people are telling more diverse stories, making more films and finding new ways to get them distributed. And with Netflix's new mandate to seek out African original content, it's an exciting time to be part of this industry. We need to be producing local stories that can travel internationally, and I think we're starting to do that, so I'm excited to be part of this new generation of filmmakers.

■ **How do you foresee this changing?**

Well, I think it's really exciting that there has been such a strong push for new voices, particularly in previously underrepresented groups, such as black, female and LGBTQ filmmakers. So, I hope to see that trend continue and to remain authentic.

I think another big change is that there has clearly been a big shift from feature films for cinema release to series and episodic content for VOD platforms over the past few years. At the European Film Market in Berlin last year, it was a big topic of discussion too. More and more money is being spent on creating really good serial content and that's thrilling for me because as a filmmaker, it gives me the opportunity to tell even bigger stories over a longer period of time. I'm really hoping to find a VOD platform for my comedy series, *Cooked* because I think it's such a great story, one that needs to be told, and there are so many more wacky characters in my head just dying to get on screen!

■ **What do you love most about your career?**

It's hard to pick one thing, but I'd say writing is my happy place. When the words are flowing, it's the best feeling in the world, like a great jazz band improvising on stage for the perfect jam session. Directing is a whole new kettle of fish; it's an adrenalin rush. It's thrilling and exhausting and frustrating and massively rewarding. It sometimes feels like the hardest job in the world, but when you start working with your team as a collaborator instead of a dictator, things just come together more seamlessly and it becomes fun. In general, filmmaking is incredibly rewarding for its own sake. You've got to do it because you love it and because otherwise, you won't be able to stand the many obstacles and rejections ahead.

I love telling stories. It's that simple!

■ **What are you currently reading/watching/listening to for work?**

I just came off a commercial I directed in Lagos, my second TVC in Nigeria, so for that, I was watching a lot of Nigerian and Kenyan content and doing a lot of research on that.

At the Sundance Film Festival: London I watched *The Last Tree* by Shola Amoo, which was fantastic and really inspired me to start crafting my visual language in my filmmaking.

Other than that, I watch a lot of Ted Talks and roundtable discussions between directors and writers I respect. I think if you want to grow in your craft, surround yourself with people you want to emulate.

I have a few books in a stack next to my bed right now that I'm kind of jumping between, including *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* by the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams, *Daring Greatly* by Brené Brown and *Leaders Eat Last* by Simon Sinek. Those might not seem like books for work, but I believe I make better work when I'm coming from a mentally, emotionally and spiritually healthy place, so I make that a priority in my life nowadays.

🍷 **Tell us something about yourself not generally known.**

I'm a pretty good Blues and Jazz singer, and I used to perform in London when I lived there. Also, I make a mean pork belly.

[Life's a Drag Trailer 60 sec](#) from [Bon Appetit Films](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Life's a Drag is a dark comedy about a depressed zombie named Bob. He used to be cool. He used to have groupies. He used to have all his body parts. Now, although the undead and the living have reached a truce, Bob is finding it hard to adjust. Life after death just isn't all it's cracked up to be. He's in a dead-end job working for a narcissist, and he hasn't been laid since before the Apocalypse. Up until now, he has played by the rules, but Bob is reaching his breaking point, and he's about to lose his temper... Life's a Drag offers a hilarious reimagining of a world in the grip of a zombie apocalypse.

Life's a Drag airs in a triple bill of SundanceTV's 2019 award-winning shorts from 20:15 on Sunday, 29 September on DStv channel 108. Follow the channel on [Facebook](#) or at [Sundancetv.co.za](#).

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