

OTHER PEOPLE PRESENTS

SIYABONGA

(WE ARE THANKFUL)

A FILM BY
JOSHUA MAGOR



OTHER
PEOPLE

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SIYABONGA

A FILM BY JOSHUA MAGOR

STARRING

SIYABONGA MAJOLA

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Photos and press kit
available on
other-people.co

SOUTH AFRICA | 1:85:1 | 5.1 | 93'

SYNOPSIS

Siyabonga (english title: *We Are Thankful*), named after the film's main character Siyabonga Majola, is a docufiction film set in the KwaZulu Natal region of modern day South Africa. It makes use of footage from both the narrative and documentary tradition.

In the film we follow Siyabonga, a young man making theatre plays in the township of Mphopomeni. One day he hears the surprising news that a movie is to be made in a nearby town and he makes it his mission to be part of the film. From conspiring with a maid to steal wifi from the *umlungus* (white people) so he can write an email to the film producers, to rebuffing a friend's urgent plea for him to improve his luck through witchcraft, Siyabonga's journey takes him down many surprising paths that ultimately lead him to meeting with the film's director. Here we observe the conversation that caused the film we are watching to come into existence.

A film based on real events, re-enacted by those who lived through them, we follow this extraordinary man as he does all he can to try and improve his life and take control of his fortune.

Siyabonga's past echoes in his present in much the same way that South Africa's own history seems to have left an indelible mark on the people and places of the film. Time moves differently in such spaces. Places are never confined to just the here and now, but rather some kind of eternal memory.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"After sending out a newspaper article looking for people to participate in a film I was planning to make, I was contacted by a young man, Siyabonga Majola, who was very keen to help and so we agreed to meet. A few days later we sat down to talk and I was so moved by this man that I threw away all my previous plans and decided to make a film about him. With this film I wanted to make something that presented the the truth of a person's spirit in the context of a country dealing with many obstacles and historical trauma. I wished to make something totally in awe of the presence of people and places as they are. I wished to do this while being observant and obedient to the rhythms and details that constitute their essences. To make a film that attends to the reality of life without bias, where both cruelty and joy are equal, elements which cannot be escaped and therefore must be confronted."

Joshua Magor



Q&A WITH JOSHUA MAGOR

Why did you decide to make this film?

The simple answer is that I met Siya (Siyabonga Majola). It really was just as simple as that. I met with him and he moved me so very deeply that I had no choice. The film presented itself to me the moment he walked in the door.

He contacted you from a newspaper article you had sent out?

Yes– I had put out an article to advertise some acting workshops I wanted to run as a way of finding actors for a film I was preparing. He saw the article and sent me a mail. From our email exchange I learnt a little about him and gained a rough idea of what his circumstances might have been coming from the township in Mpophomeni, so when he arrived to our first meeting dressed up in most formal clothes– crisp white shirt, dress shoes– I was immediately struck by him. He would have been a very uncommon sight for people on that day. We sat down, and talked and I remember very vividly this feeling of enormous determination in him. He opened up and shared some very personal stories with me. I felt like he was a man who could not be stopped. And so, I decided to make a film about him, and about this moment that stirred so much in me. We continued to meet and spend time together and the more we met the more I learnt about him, his life and about how he was even able to get to our first meeting. It was amazing. I can only thank for everything he gave for this film.

It must have been quite daunting to make such a sudden decision.

Perhaps, but I truly feel like there are many moments in life where we can inhibit ourselves because we are afraid to make a drastic decision. In the particular instance of this film my intuition felt so strong it was impossible to not follow it. I would have had regrets. I think part of what attracted me about Siya was that he seemed totally unafraid to pursue the things he wanted. He just decides, “This is what I want” and then works towards getting it .

What was it like filming back in the place you grew up?

Although I had been living outside of South Africa for 6 years at that point, I would regularly visit to see my family who were still living in Pietermaritzburg. What I found was that, because of being away for these years, whenever I came back I could see things with a little more objectivity than when I was living there. I wasn’t as sentimental or patriotic about things, rather it was as if I was able to occasionally borrow the eyes of an outsider. I think this helped me to see a lot of things which most South Africans choose to ignore.

For example?

These small dispositions that lay behind the the surface of bigger issues. For instance, behind certain failures in how the society is run– lack of amenities, etcetera– you can see a greed at the root of a lot of these things. A kind of ‘every-man-for-himself’ attitude that possesses people, that comes at the the expense of any and everyone. When an attitude like this exists in higher levels of society it always manages to find its way down into the rest of the public.

Once a precedent is set people see it as the status quo.

A bad example can easily be followed. But you know it wasn’t just the negative that I noticed. There was also so much humour and joy that I had previously taken for granted or been unable to see when I was younger. I think ultimately a lot has to do with respecting what is actually in front of you and not to get carried away with idealising too much. It was important for me to make this film in such a way that was not pitying the negative aspects or over-sentimentalising the positive ones. In every instance of filming, I sought to choose the correct point of view to find the truth of the moment, and then tried to be as present as possible. Generating this sense of presence was incredibly important to me.

The film is neither a pure documentary nor is it a pure fiction– how would you position it between these categories?

It is a film made from the organisation of real elements. Whether it belongs to the category of fiction or documentary is not so important to me. I just see it as the arrangement of elements taken from real life to form a cinematic coherence. I think that there are so many stories all around us which end up being overlooked because they do not appear to us in a familiar form or in a way that we are used to receiving them. A person’s story, a community’s story– there are many. I find it extremely inspiring to just observe things as they are, without trying to fit them into some genre or digestible narrative form; to try and see the particularities and idiosyncrasies that are present and to concentrate on them. Oftentimes I find what emerges to be very beautiful and illuminating.

You make use of many long takes of various kinds in the film. Can you speak a little about the visual style of the film?

There are may benefits to using long takes, some practical and some artistic. On a practical note, I find they are helpful when working with non-actors and making use of improvisation. Oftentimes it is difficult for non-professional actors to repeat gestures with the same continuity across different shots, so shooting sequence shots allows for these issues to be reduced. On the artistic side the long take aids in fostering presence– it gives the world a sense of permanence and allows the film to make use of time as a means of expression. The final point is perhaps the most important, as I feel that many films these days totally ignore cinema’s potential to make use of time as a cinematic tool. It is something intrinsic to the form. Cinema is sound and image over time after all, and yet it seems that the manipulation of time– its compression, its extension– is too often disregarded by films we see at the cinema nowadays. I remember when I first started to watch films that made use of time in an effective way, in particular the films of Tarkovsky, Bela Tarr, Tsai Ming Liang and Lav Diaz. I was so thrilled by them– scenes that felt like held breaths, or delirious fever dreams, or chasing spools of thread and seeing them unravel before your eyes. It was remarkable to see the effect but it also felt very natural to the medium, very essential.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Joshua Magor is a South African filmmaker based in London who originally hails from Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu Natal.

After developing an interest in filmmaking whilst making video art in high school, Joshua earned a scholarship to study English Literature and Economics at the University of Edinburgh and then progressed to do his masters degree in Filmmaking at the London Film School. During this time he worked consistently on honing his craft making short films, documentaries, video art and installations.

Joshua is extremely passionate about cinema's ability to capture the ferocious intensities of life and the medium's potential to confront realities that may otherwise remain hidden. His previous films have won awards and screened at numerous festivals around the world.

SIYABONGA MAJOLA



Siyabonga Majola was born and raised in the Mpopophomeni Township in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. He was previously involved in the Twist Theatre Development project, an outreach community theatre project where he was able to learn more about script writing, acting and directing. He has attended the Grahamstown Arts Festival twice as a stage performer. In 2016, Siyabonga directed *True Story*, a play based on the life of Nokulunga Gumede who was killed at the age of 6 while she was coming home from school during the Apartheid era. A call for awareness as much as a stage play. More recently, in 2017 Siyabonga wrote and directed *The Protector*, a play that participated at Winston Churchill District Art Festival.

"Aside from performing, my biggest dream is to own my own orphanage. Growing up I never had enough time to spend with my parents because they left me when I was young. I knew that they were somewhere, but we were living separately and as a result there was not much love between us. So the reason I want to have my own orphanage is because I want to give love to those grew up like me."

Siyabonga Majola

CREDITS

Directed by	Joshua Magor
Written by	Joshua Magor
Producers	Bronwyn Coburn Joshua Magor
Co-producers	Zhannat Alshanova Thembalihle Mncadi
Cinematography	Cem Demirer
Camera Operator	Joshua Magor
Editor	Lorenzo Nera
Assistant Editor	Brendon Miles
Assistant Director	Thembalihle Mncadi
VFX	Lorenzo Nera
Production Manager	Leoné Van Niekerk
Location Sound Recordist	Heikki Simppula
Focus Puller	Robyn Price
Grip	Michael Struwig
Gaffer	Cameron Ward
Lighting Assistants	Georgia Zeta Spyraiki Michael Struwig
Stills Photographer	Cameron Ward
Production Assistants	Devon Hesse Ntokozo Mkhize Sabelo Khoza Siyabonga Majola Nzuzo Khumalo Mondli Ndlovu
Color Grading	Ludovic Roussaux at OKAY STUDIO
Supervising Sound Editor	Tiago Cardoso
Sound Designer	Tiago Cardoso
Sound Editor	Dinis Henriques Henrique Silva
Re-recording Mixer	Dinis Henriques
Foley Artist	Leonardo Terra
Post-production Sound Services	Pulsar Studios, Portugal
Drone Operators	Thomas Mack Joseph Mack
Subtitles	Amanda Dlamini
Security Services	Knight Security Solutions
Driver	Farhad Coovadia
Starring	Siyabonga Majola Sabelo Khoza Xolani ‘X’ Malinga Amanda Ncube Percy Mncedicy Zulu Ntokozo Mkhize Sibusiso ‘Sbu’ Nzama Luthando ‘Cminzah’ Ngcobo Mancane Dlomo Nkanyiso Ndumiso Nonduh Zuma Mondli Ndlovu Luthando ‘Cminzah’ Ngcobo Mancane Dlomo Nkanyiso Ndumiso

	Nonduh Zuma Mondli Ndlovu Thembalihle Mncadi Joshua Magor The People of Mphopomeni Township The People of Howick
Special Thanks	Brian Magor Richard Kwietnioski Sue Austen Bo’s Taxis Michelle Cho Mary Magor Cameron Heathman Monika Van Heerden Brett Peattie Jason Ormrod Orms Direct Katherine Jacobs Sizwe Sithole Deborah Lynn Fergus Magor Richard Green Tamantha Hammerschlag Candy Wise Redlands Hotel Hilton Baptist Church Antonio Sequeira Julien Testa Jamie McCubbin Spongile Mchunu KZN Film Council

Featured Music

Blow Deff Child (Independent) 2017	Summertime Deff Child (Independent) 2017	Jai’ve Plug & Fnote (Dark Voyage Records) 2017
Toast Deff Child (Independent) 2017	Druids at Dawn Pendiluvio (Independent) 2012	Skwatcha Tora K (Prod. OG Hektor) (Independent) 2017

With original music by Lorenzo Nera and Joshua Magor

In association with
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BFI and the National Lottery
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Creative Skillset

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Pulsar Studios
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