

Painting a complex portrait of South Africa's democracy

The documentary *Shield and Spear* is directed by New York-based independent filmmaker Petter Ringbom, who spent a year collecting stories from some of South Africa's most influential artists about the social and political issues which they face 20 years into the country's democracy.

The emotions, personal struggles and defining events of a contemporary society are often voiced through the art which it produces. In many ways artists and musicians are viewed as the true freedom fighters of a nation, able to express, creatively and courageously, what most people wouldn't dare. In a country still bruised by apartheid, the intersection of art with politics is not only inevitable, but revealing of the complex Rainbow Nation we live in.

A serendipitous encounter

Ringbom attended the Tribeca Film Festival in New York where his first documentary, *Russian Winter*, was screening, and happened to meet Xander Ferreira, the frontman of South African band Gazelle. The two immediately struck up a friendship and had many discussions about the art and music scene in South Africa. At the same time, Brett Murray's controversial painting of President Jacob Zuma, *The Spear*, was dominating international headlines. This made an idea that had already been stirring in Ringbom's mind, all the more clear.

Ringbom comments, "When the thing with Brett happened I found a thread which I could weave through the film – freedom of expression and what that means 20 years on. I also realised that 2014 would mark 20 years since the 1994 elections, which gave even more relevance to the topic."



REVEALING THE RAINBOW NATION: Director Petter Ringbom on set in Khayelitsha

Back in South Africa Murray's painting had sparked a fierce public response and a number of death threats against him, but Ringbom felt the story was rich with the kind of issues he was looking to explore – race, sexuality, freedom of expression – and was determined to have it feature in his film.

"I tried to get in contact with Brett but for a long time he was laying low in hiding and didn't want to talk to anyone. When I eventually got hold of him he didn't want to be involved but after we met a couple of times he finally agreed," Ringbom remembers.

Art reflects life

Another story which Ringbom found particularly poignant was that of performance art and music group, The Brother Moves On, who he feels are true ambassadors of life in the new South Africa.

"I was really intrigued by the concept of these kids from townships and working class communities, who, through educational opportunities that their parents didn't have, can express themselves and are free to criticise politicians in a way which their parents couldn't. They also express frequently in their work the idea that there is no governmental party who represents their ideals and beliefs. There is even a song of theirs called 'No Party' which articulates this. They have been

approached by both the ANC and DA but won't affiliate with either one because they don't feel they really represent what they believe."

Ringbom says that these stories will not only offer international audiences a unique perspective of modern day South Africa but will also allow them to connect with what he believes is a cutting edge music and art scene that is completely globally engaged and aware.

"This is not the story usually told about South Africa and I think a kid in Brooklyn may be surprised to find he has more in common with BLK JKS than with some singer in Jersey. I could see that when we screened the film in Toronto. We had an audience full of young people who were intrigued by the fact that the characters in the film are talking the same language as them and thinking the same way," remarks Ringbom.

He also hopes that people can learn something from the political musicians in South Africa and adds, "It's not cool to be political musician or artist in the US but in South Africa it is cool and you're not pigeon-holed the way you would be here. It's really refreshing."

Just a guy with a camera

Coming from a commercials background, Ringbom has an affinity for visually captivating cinematography, no

matter the film genre, and believes this is something which allows his work to be more accessible and pleasant to watch. This, paired with the fact that throughout most of the production he alone fulfilled the duties of an entire film crew, made the Canon 5D a perfect shooting companion.

"The Canon 5D allowed me to run around freely, and provided some security. If you're shooting at night in Joburg it's good to be a bit discreet. I used cine lenses which are fairly affordable, and really help when it comes to controlling exposure. With cine lenses you can fluidly control light unlike traditional photo lenses," says Ringbom.

The small camera also made it easier to interact with the film's subjects who spoke directly into the camera. "By being in a crew of one there is nothing else for people to be distracted by, there is an immediacy there which was really interesting to work with," Ringbom remarks, adding that this technique allowed his subjects to get to know him and comfortably open up without being intimidated by bulky film equipment.

Shield and Spear will feature at the Durban International Film Festival, which takes place from 17 to 27 July 2014 at the Tsogo Sun Elangeni Hotel. – **Carly Barnes**