

A Soul Transformed

By Josef Woodard, March 16, 2006

Tsotsi

Presley Chweneyagae and Terry Pheto star in a film written by Gavin Hood, based on the novel by Athol Fugard, and directed by Hood.

"Tsotsi" translates into "thug," a blunt, one-syllable word which best describes the central character in this powerfully moving — and now Academy Award-winning — South African film. And yet the film Tsotsi — based on the novel by noted South African playwright Athol Fugard — gains much of its fairly unique power from its ability to balance thuggish tensions with matters of a heart in transition. Throughout the course of the story, Tsotsi believably metamorphoses from being an amoral dispenser of violence to someone who discovers a surprising compassion for a human baby — whom he accidentally acquires after stealing a car, and then struggles to care for. By extension, Tsotsi learns to care for the species to which the baby belongs, or so we're left to imagine.

In other words, Tsotsi has the right stuff to both illuminate the fragility and volatility of life in the Township and enough sentimental ammo to nab the foreign film Oscar, which tends to go to films with both social commentary and feel-good vibes. It was also a favorite at the recent S.B. Film Fest.

As Tsotsi, actor Presley Chweneyagae is a compelling anti-hero turned protagonist, who conveys much with a minimal range of facial expressions. Crusty hardness gives way to a simmering vulnerability, the backdrop for which we gradually learn about through well-placed flashbacks. He works out the angst of a painful childhood in the Johannesburg ghetto through his tough criminal existence and encounters with his unchecked emotional life, particularly with the help of a surrogate mother/lover (Terry Pheto) who, ironically, he forces to breastfeed the baby at gunpoint.

In this film, writer/director Gavin Hood has created a dynamic sensory experience, in a film teeming with a polished sense of craft as well as a necessary nervous urgency. Hood also manages to point out the seeming contradiction of the vibrancy of Township life and the intensity and washes of hope and even jubilation in those hardscrabble urban environments, as heard in the driving joyful pulse of Township music, liberally lining the film's soundtrack.

The not-dissimilar Brazilian film *City of God* is more relentlessly dark and violent in its depiction of the edgy life in the slums of Rio. Tsotsi holds out for hope and optimism, and the human capacity for change — even in its grimmest quarters and souls.