A SNAKE GIVES BIRTH TO A SNAKE

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SYNOPSIS

A SNAKE GIVES BIRTH TO A SNAKE follows a diverse group of South African actors as they tour global war-torn regions to share their country’s experience with reconciliation. As they ignite a dialogue among people with raw memories of atrocity, the actors find they must confront once again their homeland’s complicated and violent past and question their own capacity for healing and forgiveness.

CAN WE FORGIVE THE PAST TO SURVIVE THE FUTURE?
THE STORY OF THE PLAY AND THE DOCUMENTARY FILM

CAN WE FORGIVE THE PAST TO SURVIVE THE FUTURE?

This was the question that Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu asked the South African people after a brutal half-century of Apartheid.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There was supposed to be a bloodbath. But rather than civil war, 1994’s victory by the African National Congress in South Africa’s first multi-racial elections led to an unprecedented experiment in human nature: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). With the world watching, both victim and perpetrator told their stories face-to-face, laying a nation’s wounds on the table.

All who testified were South Africans. All were patriots in their own minds. Together they convened in town halls across the nation in an attempt to see each other as human once again. Some came for simple answers: Where is my daughter? Where is my son? Some came to speak, others to listen. Some came to forgive, others for forgiveness. The TRC was empowered to offer amnesty in return for complete disclosure by the perpetrator – a painful trade-off between truth and traditional justice, but one that ensured the nation’s survival.

Almost invisible, but always present during the TRC were the young people who translated the horrific stories shared by victims and perpetrators. With eleven languages spoken in South Africa, each testimonial required real-time translation. As interpreters, they were given a mandate to replicate emotions, yet remain emotionally uninvolved – to be impartial channels through which information flowed. But because they translated in the first person, they absorbed everything. They became every side of every testimony, embodying every truth and every lie. It was their voices that became familiar to the entire country. They became the witnesses for whom denial was not an option.
TRUTH IN TRANSLATION

In 2003, Michael Lessac conceived of creating a theatre production that would carry forward the story of the TRC through the eyes of the interpreters. After conducting extensive interviews with the interpreters, watching hundreds of hours of video, and reviewing thousands of pages of hearing transcripts, Lessac assembled a troupe of South African actors and musicians, who came from all sides of Apartheid to build a theatre production that could bring the story to conflict zones around the world. It was called Truth in Translation.

To bring music to the theatre piece, legendary South African composer Hugh Masekela created an internal score that embeds both the play – and the film – in a fabric of courage and passion. It is beautiful, tough music, with lyrics directly adapted from TRC transcripts. This music serves as a channel for storytelling, just as the interpreters were channels through which victims and perpetrators told their stories.

THE JOURNEY

The troupe takes this production to 26 cities on three continents, to countries emerging from genocide, violence and atrocity, from post-genocide Rwanda and the war-torn Balkans, to Northern Ireland after the Troubles. At each stop, bits of hope and uncertainty punctuate the journey for the actors.

The play becomes a mirror where audience and performer find themselves confronting their past through each other’s eyes. Masks are dropped. Identity is threatened. Hope emerges, even as fear of losing hope creeps in. As they challenge audiences to wrestle with their fears and hatreds, the actors begin to question the fragile reconciliation that’s held them together.

In Rwanda they encounter startling seeds of forgiveness. In Belfast they encounter suspicion, an almost militant refusal to forgive. In Kosovo, in Bosnia, in Serbia and Croatia, they encounter a people ruled by the past, unable to escape – a hopelessness the actors fight hard to combat. They absorb it all. They fray. They keep going. And, always lurking in the background, lay unavoidable questions about the very nature of forgiveness, its tenuousness, its danger and the very question of whether reconciliation itself is truly possible.

In an era when cycles of vengeance threaten to destroy the planet, can the lessons of the TRC possibly serve as an instrument of peace? Is the idea of forgiveness even viable? Does forgiveness even mean the same thing across languages and cultures? And can theatre and music – created by people who once looked down the barrel of a gun at one another – resonate in other conflict zones? Can it bring people together, across borders, to drop their masks and speak their own truths, in the hope that this will somehow allow them to see each other, really see each other... maybe for the first time?
These are the questions that drive A SNAKE GIVES BIRTH TO A SNAKE.

And the film is the result of this journey – a glimpse into the lives and minds of a group of South African performers who shared and listened; facilitated and responded to the heartbreaking real-life personal stories of the human casualties of global conflict. As South Africans representing various facets of South African society, they were forced to look at whether they themselves had even successfully "reconciled" their own individual pasts, and realized just how complex and challenging it is to engage with the multifaceted concept of forgiveness.

The documentary’s intriguing title refers to the question which often appears in conflict situations when asked why perpetrators killed young babies. The answer, irrespective of culture is always, one way or another, "A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake."

"The film was originally titled Truth in Translation, just like the play. We changed it to A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake because no matter how true that might be, when revenge is celebrated as heroism, it is a poor excuse for killing."

"THE FILM IS NEITHER TRUTH NOR FICTION. BUT IT IS TRUE. IT HAS HOPE BASED IN DESPAIR. IT IS A JOURNEY WHERE DARKNESS AND LIGHT CONSTANTLY JUMP OUT AT YOU, WHERE ONE TRUTH MORPHS INTO ITS OPPOSITE. IT TAKES THESE COURAGEOUS ACTORS THROUGH WORLDS OFTEN MORE PAINFUL THAN THEIR OWN NIGHTMARES...WHERE PEOPLE ALSO HAVE MASKS AND ARE BETTER REHEARSED THAN THEY ARE. IT IS AN HOMAGE (FOR ME) TO SOUTH AFRICANS – AS A MICRO COSM OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE. IT CAN BE PAINFUL...BUT IT ALLOWS US TO CELEBRATE A TERRIBLE TRUTH THAT EVERY REALLY GOOD ACTOR KNOWS – THAT WHAT ANOTHER PERSON LOOKS LIKE … IS OUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY."

-MICHAEL LESSAC
DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

This film has its roots in 2001, two months before 9/11. My wife Jackie and my then 92 year-old father visited South Africa because we had heard about a place that had, in pain and in celebration, forgiven the past to survive the future. They had done something that no other country in the world had ever done. I wanted to find out how, and what kind of people could do this. To me it was an evolutionary leap for humanity. For me it was a potential microcosm of hope for the world. And I decided to try to tell the story as a witness for others who needed that hope as much as I did.

What’s right about this project came from Hugh Masekela, and from the ensemble of actor creators, from various writer’s contributions, from an extraordinary group of TRC interpreters, from the words and friendship of countless South Africans we have met over years, from testimonies and stories from the TRC, from the land, the music, and from a word I cannot keep from appreciating even though I have been told it is now a cliche here in South Africa: Ubuntu.

This film is neither truth nor is it fiction. It is made up of multiple truths that fight with each other. It is based on what can happen when people really listen to each other. One of my aims in making the film was to create a feature documentary that would forge a ‘virtual dialogue’ across borders, similar to the discussions that have been generated since we first took the production to Rwanda in 2006. By crossing borders and boundaries, we learn that we are not isolated and challenge our perceptions.

I wanted to explore what it must mean to look at the world through the eyes of people who could not turn away.

The film is about the stories we’ve collected in the various places we’ve traveled - how they record and transmit and how they are also landmines. I was once asked: “What is it you want the audience to feel when they leave the theatre?”

I want people to feel that they can drop their mask, and they will not die.

I like to think that is a theme of this film.

Ironically, this movie was not supposed to have been made. We never had the funds… It was made a piece here and a piece there. When we finished touring we had accumulated over six hundred hours of footage in all different formats. It was meant to be an educational archive. But as we started looking through the footage, multiple themes and stories became fascinating to me again. There really was a story burred here. It was full of uncertainty… and that too became part of the story. The story I had in mind was layered and chaotic. It was not going to be a film that resolves itself. I liked that idea but it was hard to convince an editor until I met Joel Plotch, who embraced the chaos. It was a great collaboration.

A good friend of mine who founded one of the first major theatres in the US once said in front of the National Endowment of the Arts, that her hope was in her despair. I began to understand that as this project unfurled.

If pushed, I would like to say that the film is purely about perception – how we make people into what we think they are. But that is a longer discussion. What I do know, and am happy about, is that it is an homage to these actors and these interpreters, who proved with elegant ease…that if you drop your mask……. You will not die.

I hope it works for you as the film unfolds.

Michael Lessac
FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

MICHAEL LESSAC (Director/Producer) wrote and directed the feature film House of Cards starring Tommy Lee Jones and Kathleen Turner. He has directed sixteen pilots and over 200 television episodes, among them Taxi, Newhart, Grace Under Fire, The Drew Carey Show, Just Shoot Me, and Everybody Loves Raymond. For the stage, Mr. Lessac has directed at the National Theatre of Yugoslavia, The Guthrie Theatre, The Denver Theatre Center, The Arena Stage, The Kennedy Center, The Hartman Stage and The Public Theatre in New York City. He was also founder and artistic director of the Colonnades Theatre Lab in New York where he produced and directed over thirty productions with a company of established actors, playwrights, and composers. He is founder and artistic director of Global Arts Corps which seeks to develop new theatre pieces around the world highlighting the struggle for justice, basic human dignity, and the possibility of perceptual change. The Truth in Translation project was the first major production of those efforts. He is currently developing productions in Northern Ireland, Cambodia and Bosnia for both the stage and film.

JOEL PLOTCH (Editor) is an award-winning editor of both documentary and narrative films. His longstanding collaboration with Neil Labute has yielded such acclaimed features as The Shape of Things, In The Company of Men, and Nurse Betty. Recent documentary work includes The Beautiful Game for director Victor Buehler and Gone (Official Selection, 2011 TriBeCa Film Festival) for directors Gretchen and John Moming.

HUGH MASEKELA (Composer) is arguably South Africa's most distinguished musician. He is a Grammy nominee (Best Contemporary Pop Performance), a Tony nominee (Best Score for Sarafina!), and the recipient of Lifetime Achievement awards in Ghana, the UK and South Africa (including the National Order of Ikhamanu). He received his first trumpet at age 14 and soon began playing with such acclaimed ensembles as The Huddleston Jazz Band, The Merry Makers of Springs, Alfred Herbert's African Jazz Revue, Jazz Dazzlers, and the Jazz Epistles. In 1960, with help from Harry Belafonte and Dizzy Gillespie, he left South Africa for the USA, where he recorded for MGM, Mercury and Verve before launching his own label, Chessa. His 1968 song “Grazing in the Grass” topped the charts in the USA and has sold over 4 million copies. Masekela has collaborated with a host of top musicians, including Monk Montgomery, Fela Kuti, Herb Albert, The Byrds, Lamont Dozier, Randy Crawford, Eric Gale, Aswad and perhaps most notably Paul Simon (as a prominent part of the Graceland tour). Following the political changes in South Africa, he returned home where he continues to perform nationally to great acclaim.

JACKIE BERTRAND LESSAC (Producer) Jacqueline Bertrand Lessac has been Michael Lessac’s producing partner for the last 40 years. She co-founded the Colonnades Theatre in New York and South Africa and is executive producer and co-founder of Global Arts Corps. She was Executive Producer of the award winning play Truth in Translation which played in 11 countries on 3 continents. Her producing work on A Snake gives Birth to a Snake began in 2003 when she produced the short documentary film Ubuntu about the interpreters from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As part of the Colonnades she co-produced the documentary film “Cry of the Snow Lion.” She has also worked as an actress in theatre, film and television. Currently she is producing two productions & short films for Global Arts Corps in Northern Ireland and Cambodia.

EMMA TAMMI (Producer) Emma is a filmmaker based in New York, and the Co-Founder of Mind Hive Films. She interned for Robert Altman as a student, and after graduating from Wesleyan University, she began producing the feature documentary film A Snake Gives Birth to a Snake throughout Africa, Europe, and the U.S. She has directed, produced, and edited various short documentaries, music videos, and experimental/fashion films for web content (Visura Magazine, The Ace Hotel, Untitled, PopMatters, OkayPlayer,MTV,Narrative.ly, Billionaire.com). She recently edited the international broadcast version of the feature documentary Fambul Tok, and is currently in the post-production stages of her directorial debut for the feature documentary Fair Chase.
FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

JONATHAN GRAY (Exec Producer) is the founding partner of Gray Krauss Stratford Des Rochers LLP ("GKSD"), a New York based entertainment law firm concentrating in independent film, and has been a practicing attorney for over 20 years. GKSD has served as production counsel on over 200 films, including recently: Bully, GasLand (2011 Oscar Nominee for Best Feature Documentary), Waste Land (2011 Oscar Nominee for Best Feature Documentary), Precious (six Oscar nominations, two wins), and Beasts of the Southern Wild (four Oscar nominations, including Best Picture). Outside GKSD, Jonathan has produced or exec produced over 20 feature films, including Flannel Pajamas, Hello, I Must Be Going and The Art of Getting By (each nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance).

BOB LEAR (Executive Producer) is a co-founder of the Global Arts Corp and is its International Producer. He has been Michael Lessac’s theatre producing partner on various projects since 1976 and was Executive Producer of Lessac’s Colonades Theatre Lab in New York. For the Colonades Bob co-produced the tour of “Truth in Translation” to the former Yugoslavia (including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo) as well as to Sweden and the Edinburgh and Belfast Festivals. Bob was Producing Consultant to PBS’ Masterpiece Theatre for the television adaptation of The Colonades production, “Guests of the Nation” and was Historical Consultant to PBS’ "Humanities Film Forum".

JOSH ALEXANDER (Consulting Producer) is one of the founders of Group Effort Films. He wrote, produced and starred in BACKSEAT, which won the Audience Award at the Austin Film Festival and was released in 2008. He wrote and produced the documentary PRETTY OLD, which was Executive produced by Sarah Jessica Parker and Joe Berlinger. The film premiered at the 2012 Santa Barbara International Film Festival where it won the Jury Award for Best Documentary and played to sold-out screenings at film festivals across the US. The film was released in the US and Canada in 2014. He is currently writing and producing acclaimed photographer Gillian Laub’s debut documentary SOUTHERN RITES, which looks at a small town in Georgia coming of age around issues of race. And which is being executive produced by John Legend. He’s written two screenplays with the noted novelist Beverly Coyle and has numerous other fiction feature projects in various stages of development. He is a Consulting Producer on Michael Lessac’s documentary debut A SNAKE GIVES BIRTH TO A SNAKE. And is also currently writing on Chris Bell’s documentary film RK THUGS, a sequel to Chris’ acclaimed doc BIGGER, STRONGER, FASTER.

YVETTE HARDIE (Consulting Producer) is a South African theatre producer, director, educator, and writer. She is currently serving as President of the international ASSITEJ, which is a network of artists and practitioners working in theatre for young audiences in over 85 countries. She was the General Manager of Colonades Theatre Lab, South Africa (2003–2010), and co-produced their award-winning theatre piece, Truth in Translation. She is currently producing Mother to Mother starring Thembi Mbuthuma Jones which has played in Africa, Europe and the US.

NATHAN HALPERN (Film Score) is a composer and singer/songwriter from New York City. His most recent film score was for RICH HILL, winner of the 2014 Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary, whose theatrical release is set for August 2014 via Opus Docs. Other recent film scores include MARINA ABRAMOVIC: THE ARTIST IS PRESENT (HBO Films), winner of the Emmy Award for Best Arts and Cultural Programming & The George Foster Peabody Award, KEHINDE WILEY: AN ECONOMY OF GRACE (PBS), winner of the 2014 South by Southwest Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary Short, and Robert Redford’s ALL THE PRESIDENT’S MEN REVISITED (Discovery), Primetime Emmy nominee for Outstanding Nonfiction Special. In 2013, Halpern was commissioned to create “1913,” a sound/music installation at New York City’s Lexington Armory, commemorating the 100 year anniversary of the first International Exhibition of Modern Art.
A SNAKE GIVES BIRTH TO A SNAKE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: JONATHAN GRAY AND ROBERT LEAR, CONSULTING PRODUCER: JOSH ALEXANDER AND YVETTE HARDIE, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: HENRY JACOBSON AND ANASTAS MICHOS, MUSIC BY HUGH MASEKELA AND NATHAN HALPERN, EDITED BY JOEL PLOTCH, PRODUCED BY MICHAEL LESSAC, JACQUELINE BERTRAND LESSAC AND EMMA TAMMI, DIRECTED BY MICHAEL LESSAC.

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