



Posted to the web on: 28 June 2006

## Jo'burg's dark underbelly as never seen before

RALPH Ziman is nothing like the movies. In the movies directors are fast-talking, tough people who blurt out orders and look mean. Ziman may be a true-blue Hollywood director, but his mannerisms are gentle. His light brown eyes are kind, and he has a soft speaking voice. It is easy to like him. He is still often referred to as a South African director, but after growing up in Johannesburg and becoming a cameraman for the SABC fresh out of school, he took off for London in 1981.



The fast lane: South African Hollywood film maker Ralph Ziman, working on his movie about SA's dark underbelly, shoots a car-hijacking scene for his latest film on a set outside Boksburg. Pictures: Renée Bonorchis

By the mid-eighties he was shooting music videos in the British capital. He did work for the likes of Elton John and Rod Stewart. US acts wanted him too, and again it was the biggest names in showbiz. From Michael Jackson to Toni Braxton, Celine Dion and more, Ziman made it big in Tinseltown.

His parents still live in Johannesburg, and he has now been back in SA since December to shoot the third movie that he has both written and directed.

It's not nostalgia that has brought him back, but the realities of movie-making.

"For me it's not about SA," he says. "It's about filming things that are interesting. It's hard to find the material."

Ziman has made quite a find with this movie called Jerusalem Entjha, which means "the new Jerusalem" in Sotho. It is about gangsters who, in the post-1994 land of milk and honey, hijack buildings in downtown Johannesburg and take over their running.

"My brother manages buildings downtown. He told me about the guys who came to steal a building," says Ziman. "These guys went to see residents and shopkeepers and gave them letters saying they owned the building and gave them their bank account details."

To research the story and find out more about life and crime in Hillbrow, Ziman went out on Friday and Saturday nights with the police flying squad.

By one estimate, these criminals make up to R20m a month, he says. "It's not small-time crime, it's the mafia." It also has shades of Robin Hood.

Ziman tracked down the real deal and met them at a fast-food joint in the inner city. He says the hijackers say they are stealing back from white people what was stolen from them in the first place.

Ziman says residents told him services sometimes improved when the buildings were stolen and existing slum landlords were kicked out.

"In theory the residents do quite like these guys. But they can find their stuff flung out of the window, or worse, if they don't pay the rent," he says. "I don't take a strong moral stance on this one way or another. All of the characters' views are valid."

The movie is mostly being shot in central Johannesburg and in Hillbrow. Jerusalem is big budget for a film being shot in SA, costing about R16m. But there are some added worries — they do not work in Hillbrow on weekends and pay days because the crime is too bad.

Crime has touched the cast and crew. Ziman says in his few months in SA there has been one attempted hijacking and one armed robbery. The crew were mugged when scouting for locations in Hillbrow.

We drive to the set. It is in the depths of Boksburg in a filthy amphitheatre on the boundary of an old mining hostel.

Tendeka Matatu, a partner of local company Muti Films, is the producer of Jerusalem Entjha. He meets us at the gates to the hostel in Boksburg and walks us through.

Matatu says it has been a difficult day so far. One of the young crew members took the stunt car joyriding the night before and crashed it. As a result, before shooting could start on day 18 of 63 days, the car had to be rebuilt and resprayed. Luckily in Boksburg, which is littered with car mechanics, all of this had been possible and at speed.

Today, Ziman is trying to shoot just 45 seconds of the movie, or six-eighths of a page of script. The shoot is a long one because there are many action scenes and some special effects.

In the amphitheatre, Ziman is easy to spot. He is the guy with the camera and the hat. As we get talking he says the conditions for his last movie were harder.

"The last film I shot was in Prague in the winter — that was The Zookeeper with Sam Neill. It was 20 degrees colder."

Ziman's first film that he both wrote and directed was called Hearts and Minds. It was released in 1996 and was set in SA in the final years of apartheid.

Ziman has achieved critical acclaim for his movies but has yet to hit the big time. However, he was nominated multiple times for MTV's Best Video Award before he finally received it for his work with Faith No More.

From music videos to movies, Ziman is a perfectionist. While many directors have converted to digital, he is sticking with film. He says he has never shot on video.

Inside the amphitheatre it is smoky — a number of fires are burning in small metal drums to create atmosphere. The crew have been issued with surgical masks to keep the dust out of their lungs as far as possible.

Sitting on some comfortable chairs are two of the younger stars of the show, Jafta Mamabolo and Motlatsi "John" Mahloko. They play the main characters

when they are young boys.

The day's scene takes place after the two gangsters have stolen a car and are showing it off in front of a cheering crowd. A number of times we watch stuntman Aubrey Lovett, painted black in case the camera catches him, race the car into the auditorium and then spin it in perfect doughnuts, sending up waves of dust. The scene has quite an effect, and the crowd is not just cheering because it has to.

It may be a while before South Africans get to see this scene on the big screen. The film should be ready for release some time next year. Ziman plans to send it to the festivals and then on to international distribution, but he is keen for it to be seen in SA.

"It's a drama and not just a South African story — it has universal appeal. But in this film people will see the city — many of them for the first time," he says.

He hopes that Tsotsi's success in winning an Oscar for the best foreign language film this year makes it easier for Jerusalem. But Ziman is careful to point out that although the world is now more open to SA, Jerusalem Entjha is different in tone and content and style from Tsotsi.

"As South Africans we often seem to feel that if no one else is beating us up we'd better beat ourselves up," he says taking off his hat and whacking himself on the back.

Jerusalem is not about white guilt or apartheid. At the risk of sounding corny, he says, it is about the new SA. This will be evident in every aspect from the script to the cast to the music in the film which will feature everything from kwaito, to gospel, rap and choirs.

Ziman is a lucky guy. He can bankroll himself now on projects he chooses because of earlier successes. Every now and then he does some screenwriting which puts a bit more cash in his bank account.

Jerusalem Entjha is being shot in a mixture of languages. It was originally going to be 80% English, but Ziman says some of the scenes just worked better in the vernacular.

"I have got very high hopes for this movie. I want the audience to love it." Then Ziman gets a call — the car is ready for the next take and he is off, peering into the cameras mounted on its bonnet.

It is time to go, and Matatu walks Apteker and me back to the car. We are in a ghost town — it is an old mining hostel and Matatu says, "Come with me, you've got to see this."

We walk through a high arch, the buildings around us are boarded up and dirty. It feels as if it could be the Wild West, but it is spookier than that. Grim is a good word to describe it.

We turn to see what Matatu is trying to show us — it is the inside of a mining hostel dorm room. And it is worse than any mining company ever admitted. There are no beds or bunks, just slots that look like pull-out drawers in a morgue.

The next day the rooms will feature in a scene where the gangsters buy guns. Matatu does not relish the thought of hanging out in these rooms.

But Ziman will be showing SA what it has been too scared to show itself, despite the building of the New Jerusalem. As will be painfully clear in the movie, this,

the land of milk and honey, has a dark underbelly that few have dared to explore.

Renée Bonorchis

**Tony Manning** / *Strategist*

**Facilitation**

---

BDFM Publishers (Pty) Ltd disclaims all liability for any loss, damage, injury or expense however caused, arising from the use of or reliance upon, in any manner, the information provided through this service and does not warrant the truth, accuracy or completeness of the information provided.



Copyright © 2004 BDFM Publishers (Pty) Ltd. All Rights Reserved  
[Site Feedback](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

---