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21 July 2006

PROFILE - RALPH ZIMAN
FOCUS ON HILLBROW

By Heather Formby

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The shaft of light coming through the broken window shines on an assortment of guns that looks as if it could start a third World War. The bad guys are negotiating with the dealers who are having no problem selling their wares.

"Cut," someone shouts as SA-born movie director Ralph Ziman looks again through the camera lens at a scene in his latest movie, *Jerusalem Entjha*. The scene is being shot at a derelict mining compound near Johannesburg.

Though Ziman lives in Los Angeles, he is in SA to shoot a film about crime and, more particularly, the hijacking of a Hillbrow building, an idea he conceived after he met someone who actually did this. Building hijacking is a problem for property owners in Durban and Johannesburg's inner city and flatlands. Gangs take over the buildings illegally and extort "rentals" from their occupants.

"I've spent the past two years researching this project," he says. He clearly knows his subject, having spent many evenings in Hillbrow with police doing their work, as well as talking to criminals on the streets. "The South Africans don't mind telling you anything but the Nigerians don't say a word."

Ziman has been looking through the lens of a camera since he became an SABC news cameraman in 1981. But he left SA soon after that to avoid compulsory military service. He arrived in London without a work permit and searched for some camera work.

But no-one would employ him as they didn't believe his credentials and accused him of forging his references. "The only part of the industry which wasn't regulated at that time was music videos," he says. "It was the golden age of music videos and there were lots of bands that wanted to make them." Ziman began directing at the age of 21 - since then he has made about 400 music videos.

He later moved to the US and has worked with some of the world's most famous music artists, Michael Jackson, Elton John, Rod Stewart and the band, Queen. "I have a lot of stories to tell about these people but I can't. When you deal with large egos, record companies and managers, things can get interesting."

Ziman has won MTV's Best Video Award once and been nominated for the award many times. "The music video industry was fun for a while but as budgets went up, the industry became very controlled and you spent more money on being safe," he says.

Ziman decided he'd had enough of the music video business and moved into feature films. He directed one in SA in the mid-1990s called *Hearts and Minds* and then *The Zoo Keeper*, which was shot in Prague in 2000, and featured Australian actor Sam Neill.

He's been working as a screen writer for the past five years and written

PROFILE
RALPH ZIMAN -
Movie director
The unreality check

1 He's produced over 400 music videos and has won an MTV best Music Video Award.

2 He's worked with artists such as Michael Jackson, Queen, Rod Stewart and Elton John.

3 He's produced two feature films, including *Zoo Keeper* featuring Sam Neill.

4 He's directing a film about crime in SA which includes the hijacking of a building.

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spec scripts . "One script I sold didn't get made as it included a plane hijacking and 9/11 happened soon after it was bought."

Ziman is clearly consumed by his latest movie and has studied the nuances of crime by spending time with criminals in Hillbrow. "I wanted to make an SA film, not a township one," he says. "Everyone has a story and I have discovered every scam in the world."

Jerusalem Entjha will be released next year after 70 days of shooting has been edited down to a few hours. "It's a big project," he says. "We have more than 100 speaking parts in the cast and hundreds of people involved."

"I don't think about what is next; I'm too busy thinking about *Jerusalem*. I'll probably be working with this movie for about five years so I have to love it." He'll also be an expert on crime.

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