

Catch A Fire

The grim world of late apartheid in South Africa is the context of *Catch A Fire*, the story of one man's politicization in that troubled land. Directed by Australian Philip Noyce (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Quiet American*), the film works principally because of a gripping performance by Derek Luke (who played the lead in *Antwone Fisher* a few years back) as Patrick Chamusso, a real-life figure in the South African struggles.

Chamusso is an immigrant Mozambican who has come to work in the mines of the East Transvaal at the age of 15. We see him get married to the sweet Precious (Bonnie Henna), rise in his job, become a father and a soccer mentor to young boys, and remain resolutely non-political. A night of sabotage at the plant leads, however, to him being questioned by the local anti-terrorist chief Nic Vos (Tim Robbins). Patrick cannot explain his whereabouts because he was with another woman, an old flame. He is eventually imprisoned and tortured.

Even worse is to come: Chamusso's wife is assaulted, and his mind begins to turn to thoughts of vengeance. Payback means giving up his family life and fleeing to the African National Congress (ANC) headquarters in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, to train to fight the apartheid regime. He returns clandestinely to his old plant to destroy it but is caught and sent to Robbins Island, the infamous prison site, from where he is released in 1991.

This movie could be called "The Making of a Terrorist"—or Freedom Fighter, if you wish. What it does attain is an understanding of how one modest, hopeful, but mildly flawed life can bend and twist into fury and revenge. A happy-go-lucky fellow morphs into a single-minded warrior, and Luke makes us feel that transformation, personally and viscerally. With him, we feel the burn.

Less successful, because too ambiguous, is Tim Robbins's portrayal of Vos. Early on in the film, it appears that director Noyce wants this figure to appear as a complex character who will surprise us with his smarts and turns of mind (e.g., one such shift is suggested when—after Patrick's incarceration in a vile camp—Vos invites the African to a nice dinner with his wife and kids), but this intriguing aspect of his character fades as he eventually turns into a predictable, one-dimensional Afrikaner bent on capture.

Overall, however, *Catch A Fire* convinces with its splendid evocation of the Southern African landscape, with the early measured, then propulsive force of its narrative, and with the outstanding incarnation of Patrick Chamusso by Derek Luke.

(The film is rated "R" for violence and raw scenes of prison life.)

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