

## Tsotsi

Around the time this column appears, the 2006 Academy Awards will have been given out. As usual, the foreign-language films nominated for the Oscar get short shift in local cinemas or have not made it to local screens at all. One picture, about a pair of uncertain Palestinian terrorists, *Paradise Now*, has already been shown. Another, this one nominated by South Africa, is *Tsotsi*, which will open soon. Don't be surprised if it wins the Academy's prize, and watch for this film, which takes a hard look at a hard life.

*Tsotsi* is based on the only novel written by South African playwright Athol Fugard ("The Blood Knot," "Master Harold and the Boys," "A Lesson in Aloes," etc.). Its world is that of Johannesburg's teeming, crime-ridden townships and its focus is one young man, Tsotsi (meaning "thug" or "hoodlum"), who strays out of that world to portentously intersect with another.

Tsotsi (Presley Chweneyagae) is a vicious 19-year-old gang leader who runs a pack of mugs who prey on the old and poor and slow in their gritty city. He preys on his own, too, coolly beating up one of his crew, Boston (Mothusi Magano), after an argument. One evening, a desperate Tsotsi sneaks into a well-off suburb, injures a woman, steals her car, and drives off--with her five-month-old baby in the back seat! Utterly befuddled about what to do, he eventually enlists the help of Miriam (Terry Pheto), a single mother in his neighborhood, to suckle and care for the child.

His possession of the baby, his thinking about it, begins to change him. He worries about how to care for and feed the child; he witnesses, for the first time in his life, how a woman cares for an infant. He, an orphan from birth, discovers tenderness and calm. He finally decides to give back the child and, along with his buddies, returns to the child's home and a wrenching confrontation with the family.

Writer/director Gavin Hood, a South African native, has, with his second feature film, crafted a story of rootless urban youth that can stand with earlier classics of the genre, like De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946), Buñel's *Los Olvidados* (1958), and the more recent *City of God* by Fernando Meirelles. Out of lives barely redeemable, Hood has created a character of weight and presence, one threatening yet vulnerable. Young Chweneyagae--in his film debut--wonderfully embodies that character, a grim menace who slowly opens up to true emotions. The whole picture is filled with wonderful, convincing performances from a batch of actors you have never heard of but will enjoy watching.

Hood's work is also enhanced by carefully wrought camera work, full of provocative imagery, such as an unforgettable image of street kids living in a series of stacked culverts--the world where Tsotsi comes from. Then there is also the great music track, a mix of raw "Kwaito" music (South African hip-hop) and haunting Zulu laments, which matches perfectly both the pulse of the Johannesburg ghetto and the tribulation of its people.

(*Tsotsi* is rated "R" for taut street violence.)

(March 2006)