

Cry, The Beloved Country

Alan Paton's novel "Cry, the Beloved Country" is one of the most widely read--and revered--books of this century. As it was being written, South Africa was not yet under the Afrikaaners' official policy of *apartheid*. That "separateness" policy became effective only after Paton's novel appeared in 1948. Thus, *Cry, the Beloved Country* is not so much an anti-apartheid novel as it is a poetic rendering of South Africa's racial separation and the human struggle to bridge that separation.

The novel's heartfelt theme of the possibility of brotherhood across races--in one of the globe's most beleaguered yet beautiful countries--is captured intact in the newly released film version of the novel.

Cry, the Beloved Country was filmed once before, in 1952, in an honorable (if somewhat stilted) multi-national effort featuring a young Sidney Poitier (in one of his first film roles). This current version is, however, very much a South African production, a bellwether of the enormous changes in that country. Produced and directed by South Africans Anant Singh and Darrell James Roodt (who teamed in 1992 for *Sarafina!*) and written by South-African-born Ronald Harwood, the film also boasts a thoroughly South African crew and cast, aside from the leads, James Earl Jones, Richard Harris, and Charles S. Dutton. Together all have wrought a work worthy to be placed in the top ranks of international cinema.

The story traces the wrenching odyssey of Stephen Kumalo (Jones), a provincial Anglican priest from Zululand, who journeys to Johannesburg (in 1946) to both save an errant sister (fallen into prostitution) and to reconnect with a wayward son, Absalom (Eric Miyeni). Though shocked by the big city, he gets help from a fellow priest, Msimangu (Vusi Kunene), who serves him as a kind of Virgil through the minor-league Dante's hell that is the black township, Sophiatown. Also encountered in his quest is Stephen's long estranged brother John (Dutton), a savvy political activist.

Kumalo's dogged search is contrasted with the tragedy that befalls the family of rich landowner James Jarvis (Harris), whose farmland borders Kumalo's parish. Jarvis's son, committed to helping poor young black men in the Johannesburg townships, is killed in a robbery attempt. The murder shatters Jarvis, but his initial thirst for revenge is tempered when, in investigating his son's life, he exposes the narrowness of his own views. The two patriarchs' lives converge when Kumalo learns that it is his Absalom who has been arrested, along with two other young black men, for the murder of young Jarvis. An errand brings Kumalo face-to-face with Jarvis, to whom he confesses that it was his own Absalom who killed the other man's son. Stephen Kumalo sees his son tried for murder--and convicted--before returning to his parish, where he again must face Jarvis on their own home territory.

The novel "Cry, the Beloved Country" was--and is--known for its stately, cadenced prose (as in the Zulu rhythms of words like *umfundesi*, a term of honored address for a priest). Harwood's script is an honorable transfer of the text, while Roodt's direction attains these same qualities cinematically. The movie's pace and imagery are as patient and reverential as the lines that roll from James Earl Jones' famous bass-baritone. Besides being Dantesque, the film could be called Biblical, not only in its timeless, formal language, but in its ageless themes of suffering and redemption.

For James Earl Jones, Stephen Kumalo is likely his best movie role since *The Great White Hope* (his 1970 Oscar-nominated performance). Reinvoking the Biblical idea, his Stephen is a modern Job, taking on the burdens of the world with but his dignity and tears to defend himself. Jones gets just right both the gravity and moral weight of Kumalo, along with his up-country shyness and naiveté. His resolutely downturned lips and damp eyes are testaments to the shocks and sins to which he is exposed, but they are also on display when he must courageously tell Jarvis of “the heaviest thing of all our years.”

While his is a supporting role, Richard Harris’s Jarvis is a telling one, a crucial counterpoise to Jones’ Kumalo. He achieves something rare in motion picture acting: to convincingly show a genuine change in a character over the course of a film’s narrative. First seen as severe, hard-headed martinet, Jarvis’s painful discovery of his son’s liberal values earns him a general understanding of the black dilemma and a particular sympathy for the pitiable Kumalo family. Not only does Harris make these changes real, he carries them off with laudable restraint (in an actor prone to excess).

Charles S. Dutton adds further stature to the film with his pugnacious portrayal of John Kumalo, the urban hustler who is beginning to learn how to manipulate the system--so distinct from his guileless brother. A cluster of South African supporting actors round out a splendid cast. Standouts are Mr. Kunene as a young priest-in-the-making, uncertain of his practice but somehow certain of his calling, and Eric Miyeni as Absalom, achingly uncomprehending as the victim of a system and his own appetites.

The whole film is rendered with intelligence and tact, from the moody atmosphere of Paul Gilpin’s camerawork through the careful recreation of the period (a modern slum called Kliptown stands in for Sophiatown) to the plangent music--which is highlighted by occasional tracks from Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

All of the above could sound forbidding to some as perhaps *too* stately, *too* grim. Admittedly, there is little humor (if you want yucks, rent *Ace Ventura*), and the drama is one forlorn discovery after another. Yet the original story is so powerful in its momentum towards reconciliation that it carries you along. Alan Paton, through his character Msimangu, worried that “when the white man turns to love, the black man will have turned to hate.” It’s a kind of miracle that that has not happened in South Africa, and it is that miracle that *Cry the Beloved Country* commemorates.

(“*Cry, the Beloved Country*” is rated PG-13.)

A TALK WITH THE PRODUCER, ANANT SINGH

Anant Singh is of Asian origin, is considered “colored” in the land of his birth, South Africa, yet calls himself “black.” A cinema aficionado from his early years, Mr. Singh got his start distributing 16mm films and videos, then moved from the distribution of movies to their production in 1984. As South Africa’s first non-white film producer, he has come to play an important part in his nation’s film industry, and, with *Cry, the Beloved Country*, he has launched the first major feature film in South African history.

Interviewed by the *Hill Rag* during a recent Washington visit, Singh noted his long-term commitment to the filming of the Paton novel. He had read the book as a school boy, but that “didn’t make as big an impression (on me) as rereading it ten years ago.” He bought remake rights to the novel eight years ago with the intention--and

hope--of producing the film version "in a post-apartheid South Africa." With Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, his film dream entered the realm of possibility.

Singh said the film was years in development, but he always knew he wanted James Earl Jones as his lead and was able to discuss the role with the actor early on. He then contracted Ronald Harwood (who scripted *The Dresser* and *The Browning Version, inter alia*) as the screenwriter. Richard Harris was also Singh's first choice for the role of James Jarvis; "he signed on immediately after seeing the script," said the producer. While staying busy with other projects--including *Sarafina* (1992) in South Africa, *Fatherhood* (1993) in the U.S., and *Captives* (1994) in England--Mr. Singh kept working on *Cry*, rounding up director Roodt and his crew and scouting locations. The film ultimately cost \$6.5 million--a whopping sum for South Africa (if not for Hollywood)--which made it the most expensive motion picture ever made in the country, .

Although he has been politically active (he mentioned that he had been jailed for anti-apartheid activities), Singh does not see *Cry, the Beloved Country* as a "protest" film. Rather, he feels "the film is more a celebration of the nation--a reconciliation." He feels its message is the same for any audience, which "should reflect on the spiritual reconciliation between the black and the white man."

The film opened commercially in South Africa in October (1995), and it has proved to be the highest grossing South African film in that nation's history. Asked how the production has been received so far in the States, Mr. Singh termed American reaction to it as "magnificent."

Even before its opening, Anant Singh knew that *Cry, the Beloved Country* had real potential from two crucial preview screenings in South Africa. One was for Alan Paton's family (the author died in 1988), who felt the film was entirely consistent with the spirit of the contemporary classic. Another was for President Nelson Mandela himself, the man whose release triggered the film's very existence. The South African leader praised it as a "monument to our future." Let's hope he is right.

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