



Friend or foe? Hijacker Charlie Z (Thato Moraka) tries to balance fear and purpose in Aubrey Sekhabi's *Silent Voice*

Razor-sharp local play shows that crime is seldom cut and dried

SILENT VOICE
directed by Aubrey Sekhabi

Review: Christina Kennedy

Crime is currently the subject *du jour* at the State Theatre, with several plays tackling this national malaise from different angles.

Aubrey Sekhabi's *Silent Voice*, the latest addition to the crime-theatre canon, focuses on the planning, execution and aftermath of a cash-in-transit heist from the criminals' point of view, making for riveting and disturbing viewing.

In providing the backstories of a quartet of thugs, *Silent Voice* could very easily have veered into the trap of portraying the perpetrators as

victims, but luckily manages to succeed in navigating the tightrope between empathy and horror.

The action does not play out on an elevated stage at the Momentum Theatre at the State, but rather in and around construction scaffolding. Apart from a percussionist providing sound effects and the actors' extensive physical exertions, there is little else on stage – apart from a go-kart getaway car and some white stuffed puppets to symbolise the gang's victims.

We meet four criminals who all call each other by the nickname "Charlie". Presley Chweneyagae, the star of the Oscar-winning film *Tsotsi*, should try to avoid being typecast as a criminal – yet he does it so well. This time, his "Charlie" is less of a brooding soul and more an experienced hijacker who seems to

take pleasure in killing people, interspersing his brutal violence with passages from the Bible in an attempt to justify his actions. "You grow fond of killing people," this trigger-happy renegade says.

His partners in crime are *Tsotsi* co-star Zenzo Ngqobe (currently starring in e.tv's soapie *Rhythm City*), Boitumelo "Chuck" Shisana and Thato Moraka. Together, they meticulously plan a heist.

The audience is privy to the doubts, fears, nerves, conflicts and even euphoria that criminals experience when carrying out a "job". As the police close in on them, suspicions are nourished into full-blown paranoia and, pumped up on adrenaline, instinct starts replacing reason and the body count rises.

During the hit and their subsequent flight, the hijackers' stories

start tumbling out, giving context to their actions and attitudes, and to why they chose a life of crime. Superstition and religion are used as crutches by these villains.

One is hooked on drugs and warped zealotry, one wants to please a materialistic lady friend, one is reacting to his mother's imprisonment for murdering his father, one wants to secure the future of his child. These histories do not always convince and could be padded out or nuanced for more effect.

Aspects of relative morality arise, such as whether it is justified to steal to survive, as long as there is no violence involved.

The audience becomes conflicted as we grow to know the characters – do we want them to get away with the crime, do we want them to be caught and punished, or do we want

them to see the error of their ways?

Fortunately, Sekhabi doesn't sugar-coat the climax of this harrowing criminal odyssey. He portrays criminals as humans and illuminates what may be going on in their minds, but never condones their actions.

Crime is seldom a cut-and-dried affair of thoroughly bad eggs carrying out evil deeds – there is a social, intellectual and emotional background that fuels it, which *Silent Voice* casts much-needed light on.

Admittedly, watching a hijacking taking place – even if it is on stage, with the fourth wall between us and them – is heavy going, but this is life projected as art, and it's utterly compelling viewing.

● *Silent Voices* runs at the State Theatre in Pretoria until May 18

Visual history of a city of contradictions

During a career spanning half a century, photographer David Goldblatt has been a keen observer of Johannesburg and its disparate realities

JOBURG
by David Goldblatt

Review: Mary Corrigan

Joburg is certainly an intriguing muse. Over the 50-odd years that David Goldblatt has travelled around South Africa, photographing its landscape, architecture and people, his gaze keeps returning to the city of Johannesburg, interrogating her facades and unravelling her secrets.

For Goldblatt and many other photographers who have continued to train their camera lenses on this divided conurbation, Joburg embodies the contradictions inherent in our society. It is the place in which the new order galvanised by democracy collides with the tenacious legacy of apartheid in obvious and poignant ways.

In this exhibition Goldblatt showcases photographs from the 1960s to the present day, thereby juxtaposing the past with the present. The result is an uncomfortable dialogue that in many instances implies that while Joburg's architectural facades have transformed, social realities have not. In fact, many of Goldblatt's black-and-white photographs of Joburg's past are indistinguishable from the present, so much so that one is forced to read the titles of the artworks to place them within the proper time frame.

It's a disconcerting exercise. But typical of Goldblatt's practice, which is often engineered to unsettle his audience, thereby provoking them to ponder the values that drive our conflicted and troubled society.

At a time when many South Africans have been rudely awakened from the rosy rainbow nation fantasy and are contemplating the status and achievements of our fledgling democracy, *Joburg* offers some pertinent observations.



Mrs Miriam Mazibuko watering her garden, Extension 8, Far East Alexandra Township, 12 September 2006

Contrasting images of vacated streets, homes and shops in Fietas (Pageview) taken in the 1970s when its Indian and coloured population had been removed to townships with present-day depictions, such as one of a domestic worker seated outside a townhouse complex in the northern suburbs, creates the impression that the impoverished or previously disadvantaged are still relegated to the fringes of our society, settled on the outside, looking in.

Offering further social commentary is *Mrs Miriam Mazibuko watering her garden, Extension 8, Far East Alexandra Township, 12 September 2006*, which features a woman living adjacent to a graveyard. The implication is that she is surrounded by death, yet goes about her life undisturbed by this frightening reality.

This obviously resonates with our crime- and Aids-riddled society, in which survival demands that violence and disease be consigned to the edge of consciousness.

But Goldblatt doesn't just offer a politicised view of this city. As much as he is motivated by a desire to reveal the unsightly truths that lurk behind the city's chic veneer, he is similarly fascinated by its façade, its architectural dimensions, physical textures and tones and the interplay between these characteristics.

A 1975 study of the junction between Pim and Gogh Streets in Newtown (before they became Nxumalo and Gwigiwi Mwebi), obviously has political undertones, but it also meditates on the intersection of angles created by signs, concrete structures and the undercarriage of the highway that meet at this juncture.

This image might appear to be mundane but it is visually compelling, creating a suffocating ambience. In this way Goldblatt evokes the manner in which urban structures not only control movement and our concept of space but also the strong emotional impact they exert over us.



The Hillbrow Tower from Quartz Street, May 1975. Veteran South African photographer David Goldblatt explores the textural and corporeal qualities of Joburg's concrete landscape

The Hillbrow Tower from Quartz Street, May 1975 is another example of the way architecture influences our psyche. Goldblatt crops the tower's apex, which draws attention to its thick, solid, grey trunk and creates the illusion that the tower extends infinitely, wielding control not just over the land but the sky too.

Goldblatt is particularly interested in the relationship between natural and man-made elements. This is brought strongly into focus in photographs of *Walter Sisulu Square in Kiptown, Wedding on Pullinger Kop, Hillbrow, 1971* and images of Joburg's leafier suburbs of Houghton and Fellside.

The relationship between these two contradictory elements is manifested in different ways in each of these images. At Walter Sisulu Square the landscape is enveloped by a concrete monument/construction. Circular openings in the concrete allow small trees to flourish in a controlled and confined area in this heavy grey mass that dominates the topography.

Here the architecture obviously overpowers and controls the environment and is fashioned so as to commemorate and celebrate South Africa's past and present. Goldblatt suggests that this concrete site is not just evidence of humankind's desire to master the natural realm but also

substantiates an urge to carve and shape our realities while conferring significance on our existence.

In *Wedding on Pullinger Kop, Hillbrow, 1971*, which sees a couple tying the knot adjacent to a waterfall on the edge of Hillbrow, Goldblatt presents a stunning concurrence of natural and man-made elements, which are shown to be coexisting in the urban context.

This image and others make it clear that people have a yearning to be close to nature during landmark events in their lives. Goldblatt is interested in the contradictory relationship human beings have with nature; while we are bent on harnessing and destroying nature, we

prize its beauty and hanker for those moments when we can be immersed in its magnificence. Exploring this paradoxical connection between humankind and nature, Goldblatt is able to delve into the core conflicts that define city living.

This exhibition does not offer one single narrative or insight; it is almost as intricate and multi-layered as its subject. And that is perhaps what keeps Goldblatt coming back to Joburg for more: beneath the surface there is much that has yet to be mined in this city.

● *Joburg is on at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg until May 24*

Card players dealt a very disappointing hand

21
directed by Robert Luketic

Review: Ty Burr

Movie critics have their own way of counting cards. When characters in a Hollywood movie do something that feels true and freshly observed, the count goes +1. When they behave tritely, spout clichés and generally act as though the screenwriters understand life only from other movies, we're -1. A lovmaking montage that dissolves from one gauzy, disembodied limb to another? -10.

By any fair count, *21* is -372, and that's a shame, as many people were holding out high hopes for this one. Recent converts to the neo-Vegas gambling craze craved the buzz they get from drawing a skeet flush. Readers of the film's nonfiction source, Ben Mezrich's *Bringing Down the House: The Inside Story of Six MIT Students Who Took Vegas for Millions*, wanted the book's gubby little details. Fans of British actor Jim Sturgess hoped the dreamy *Across the Universe* star would ascend to the next rung of

fame. Massachusetts Institute of Technology alums looked forward to seeing their campus on screen.

Me, I just wanted a decent card movie, and it didn't even have to be as good as *Rounders*.

But everyone gets dealt a stiff hand in this bust from director Robert Luketic (*Legally Blonde, Monster-in-Law*). *21* spins a hackneyed morality tale about the rise and fall of a young Boston innocent named Ben Campbell (Sturgess, tripping awkwardly over a generic American accent), an MIT undergrad who's desperate to come up with the tuition for Harvard Med.

Ben, a born numbers adept, is invited to join a secret campus blackjack club led by a Mephistophelean professor played by Kevin Spacey.

Sturgess evinces little of the feckless charm he showed in *Universe*. Worse, his chemistry with Kate Bosworth, as a beautiful blonde fellow member of the card-counting club, is less than zero. The team members meet by night, test their strategy in underground Chinatown gambling dens and fly to Vegas on the weekends for delirious jags of running the numbers and the winnings up.

As with all morality tales, we're

shown the benefits of high rolling – the clothes! the luxury suites! the soft-focus sex! – and then solemnly informed it's bad for us. Ben's head swells and lessons must be learned. Gunning for the students and their mentor is Cole Williams (Laurence Fishburne), an old-school Vegas security chief with an even older school name.

Disappointment No 1: the details of card counting are skimmed. A classroom example is trotted out early in the film but it's not explained very well and the scenes at the blackjack tables don't clear it up. Maybe the gambling industry has a stake in this movie? Maybe the film-makers just think we're stupid?

Disappointment No 2: ethnics go to the back of the bus. The name of the hero of Mezrich's nonfiction bestseller, Kevin Lewis, was an alias for student Jeff Ma; the real MIT team was primarily Asian-American. *21* waves the wand and turns them into three Anglos, one idiot klepto Korean-American and Kianna, a mixed-race woman who seems the smartest person here.

Disappointment No 3: MIT looks suspiciously like Boston University. Wait, it is Boston University. Not a deal breaker, but indicative of a lack



Kevin Spacey plays the professor who heads the card-counting club in *21*

of interest in local realism.

Vapid and over-edited, *21* is a studio concoction. By the time the end credits roll around, you realise nothing's actually been risked. It's the gambling equivalent of *Go Fish*.

The movie's chief audience, consequently, will probably be gullible and young, responding to the clichés only because they haven't seen them before. They have a word in Vegas for these people: suckers. – *The Boston Globe*

Horror in the mist misses the mark

THE MIST
directed by Frank Darabont

Review: Michael Rechtshaffen

Having successfully brought Stephen King to the screen with 1994's *The Shawshank Redemption* and 1999's *The Green Mile*, Frank Darabont returns to the well a third time but comes up a mite soggy with *The Mist*.

Decent special effects aside, the thriller – about a killer fog that rolls into a Maine community and traps terrified townsfolk in a grocery store as it unleashes a menagerie of otherworldly predators – is less horrific than it is horribly didactic.

Set extensively in that supermarket, the two hour-plus gabfest plays like an extended hoary *Twilight Zone* episode gussied up with state-of-the-art computer-generated imagery, but Darabont's moralising about the monsters that lurk within proves far less intriguing than the nasty creatures from beyond.

Meanwhile, a capable cast led by Thomas Jane, Marcia Gay Harden and Andre Braugher find them-

selves fighting another losing battle trying to breathe a little flexibility into their stock characters who, even by horror movie conventions, come across as more than a little hokey.

Theatrical prospects for this Dimension Films production are iffy given the current horror movie market, though the younger fright-night crowd might catch up with it on DVD, where they can skip over all the blah-blah-blah and get right to the cool carnage.

Jane's David Drayton is a movie-poster artist and respectable family man who, accompanied by his young son (Nathan Gamble), has gone to pick up supplies at the local grocery store after a violent storm has sent a large tree crashing through his front window.

Turns out the storm has also left a spooky mist in its wake that is rapidly encroaching on the entire town as well as harbouring all manner of deadly supernatural creatures in its depths.

Things aren't necessarily a whole lot more pleasant inside the market, where David finds himself surrounded by a shrill, Bible-thumping zealot (Harden), who holds all sinners responsible for

the occurrence, and an equally hard-nosed lawyer (Braugher) demanding logical explanations, in addition to other archetypes.

In the process, the store has become a platform for observations about the effects of mass hysteria and the microcosms of society that have a habit of springing up in confined spaces.

That's all very well up to a point, but this is supposed to be a horror movie, after all, and Darabont takes his sweet time before getting around to unleashing all those terrifying tentacles and stingers that emerge from the mist.

Then it's back to more verbal histrionics in the aisles.

Although comparatively compact by Darabont's usual standards, the picture still runs noticeably long for its genre, even as he tries to energise the prolonged exchanges by darting around the store with a hand-held camera.

Mist does well by its special-effects budget, with visual effects supervisor Everett Burrell and creature design and make-up effects artist Greg Nicotero providing the type of large-scale thrills absent in this otherwise stagey effort. – *The Hollywood Reporter*