

FILM REVIEW

Jahmil X. T. Qubeka, dir. *Knuckle City*. 2019. Xhosa and English with English Subtitles. 120 minutes. South Africa. Yellowbone Entertainment. Available on Amazon Prime and Hulu.

Jahmil X. T. Qubeka is best known for his 2013 film *Of Good Report*, which earned the distinction of being the first South African film to be banned following the nation's transition to a multiracial democracy when the Film Publication Board denied it classification. Though this ban was ultimately overturned, it set off a contentious debate in South Africa around artistic freedom in the new national dispensation. In terms of theme and style, there are clear links between *Knuckle City* and *Of Good Report*. Both films have a circular narrative structure connecting the past to the present, employ elements of *film noir*, and feature men who are emblematic of toxic masculinity, which is clearly a preoccupation of Qubeka's. *Knuckle City*, however, enters the pantheon of boxing films centered around an underdog fighting for one last chance at greatness and his family's survival.

In keeping with the *noir* style, *Knuckle City* has an intricate plot line that moves back and forth between the past and the present. The film begins in the present with a sense of foreboding as the protagonist Dudu "Night Rider" Nyakama (Bongile Mantsai) is being wheeled into a hospital on a gurney after a fight. The image is blurry, speech is slurred, and in the background a heartbeat punctuates the film's score as the camera offers a closeup of Dudu's bloodied face. This scenario draws the viewer into the film's narrative, as we are left to wonder if Dudu won the bout that landed him in the hospital and whether he will survive. From there, the film flashes back to 1994 when Dudu, then a thirteen-year-old boy, is coming of age in Mdantsane, a Black suburb in the city of East London known for its boxing culture. That the film flashes back to 1994, the year often cited as the end of apartheid with the first multiracial election, is no doubt significant. Dudu's father (Zolisa Xaluva), a champion boxer enmeshed in the criminal underworld, had a penchant for schoolgirls and a problem with alcohol. When he was killed in an ambush by his boxing rival, Dudu, a dutiful son who hoped to follow in his father's footsteps as a champion fighter, and his younger brother Duke

(Thembekile Komani) who was already dabbling in crime, were left to fend for themselves with their bedridden mother who was paralyzed in the attack. Some twenty-five years later, in 2019, not much has changed. Though whites are mostly absent in the film, the two instances in which they are present serve as a reminder of the structural inequities and cultural racism that continue to exist in South Africa: a Boer man who is carjacked by Duke for his Mercedes Benz and a white woman, described in the film as “South Africa’s number one boxing fan,” clearly enamored with the spectacle of Black violence. Just as in 1994, Mdantsane is rife with poverty, and boxing is seen as a way out.

The stilted development of the nation, as represented by Mdantsane, is echoed in the lives of Dudu and Duke. As Dudu says in the film, “Art Nyakama, the man I called father, showed me three ways of being. One was as a celebrated, former world boxing champion. The second was the path of a career criminal stumbling in and out of jail, not knowing who you are. The third was in the back of a hearse.” In real life, Mdantsane has produced some seventeen champion fighters since 1994, but few have been able to translate their accomplishments as boxers to success outside of the ring. Qubeka was thus interested in what he describes as the tension between the discipline required to be a successful boxer and the lack of discipline these men have in their home lives. Though Dudu is in many ways the moral center of the film, he is a complicated protagonist. He is depicted as a disciplined fighter who trains daily, stands up to neighborhood gangsters when they harass women and children in the community, and tries to keep his brother out of trouble. However, like his father, he is a womanizer with a predilection for schoolgirls. He has a bevy of children by different mothers whom he has charged his eldest daughter, Nosisi (Awethu Hleli), with looking after. And he is willing to enlist his brother for help in order to land a spot in the championship fight in the corrupt world of boxing.

The cool color tones employed throughout the film accentuate the bleakness of the social landscape and the brutality that exists both in and out of the ring. Despite the grim subject matter, however, the film takes an unexpectedly optimistic turn by its end. Dudu, it is revealed, emerged victorious and will presumably live to fight another day, certainly outside the ring if not in it. *Knuckle City* was produced by Yellowbone Entertainment, a Black-owned production company, in association with Mzansi Magic, a digital satellite channel focused on South African content and owned by Multi-choice. The film’s technical quality, superb acting, and engaging story are indicative of its potential for popular appeal, though like so many other South African films, it struggled to find an audience and had an underwhelming run at the local box office. It was selected as South Africa’s official entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the 92nd Academy Awards, though it was not ultimately nominated. Nevertheless, it is an

engaging production that has a chance for broader reach now that it is available on the streaming channels.

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