

film scene: **barry ronge**

# The covert comedian

A local film that focuses on the Muslim community in Joburg is both insightful and hilarious



DOUBLE LIFE: Riaad Moosa, left, and Vincent Ebrahim sell fabric

Material ★★★★★

**M**ATERIAL is the brain-child of Ronnie Apteker, a South African who has produced a couple of off-beat local comedies using familiar comedians as the lead players.

This is his most complex and most impressive film to date and it has had a long gestation. It took about six years of going backwards and forwards to get the all the aspects of the film in place. The focus is on stand-up comedy, which has a strong following in South Africa, and the initial film was going to be about the comedy scenes and its flamboyant characters.

But over six years, with many discussions between Apteker, the writer-director Craig Freimond and Riaad Moosa, the story went through various permutations.

Eventually it evolved into a classic family drama, but with an interesting theme about comedy, and how it can break down barriers between people; and how families can — and must — change if they are to survive.

The title, *Material*, takes on many meanings as the film progresses. On the most literal level, it's about material as fabric. The story is about two brothers who have been conducting a feud over many years. Both men own and run material shops, one in the side streets of Fordsborg and the other in the more upmarket Oriental Plaza.

Another meaning of the word relates to wealth — in the sense of material possessions, and most importantly the material from which a stand-up comedian

draws his inspiration.

It features a group of the country's top comedians — Riaad Moosa, Joey Rasdien, Nik Rabinowitz and even old-timer Mel Miller — but it's not really about comedians. The central plot is that Cassim Kaif (Moosa), is a dutiful son and a good Muslim, but also an extremely funny stand-up comedian. What makes him stand out in the bunch is that he uses the material of his life, his culture and his community to create his comedy.

The point is that he is doing it covertly. Daily he opens the fabric shop, serves at the counter and works with his father, Ebrahim Kaif (Vincent Ebrahim), who does not have a clue about Cassim's "second" life as a stand-up comedian.

That's what gives this film its emotional dynamic. It's a generational clash. Cassim's father has not changed over the decades. His life today is no different from the way it was 30 years ago.

There's another issue: Ebrahim still nurtures anger and aggression towards his brother, Rafiq played by Roysten Stoffels. The two brothers are totally estranged. They are very similar in temperament and, even though their two shops are within a within a five-minute walk, they haven't exchanged a word in decades.

It's a complex family drama, but what lifts the film to another level is the superb comedy. In my opinion, writer-director Craig Freimond does his best work yet. The insight into the community and into the characters is handled with charm, and the

comedy is sharp enough to bite, but not aggressive enough to be destructive.

The acting is first rate and any movie in which the luminous and compassionate actress Denise Newman appears is worth a look. She plays Fatima, the long suffering mother. Rasdien is excellent as Yusuf, Cassim's friend.

What makes *Material* stand out is that it changes the game. So many films that are made in South Africa relate to the apartheid years, the ANC struggle, and the urban riots that led to the new South Africa.

The Muslim community is seldom the focus of a South African film. In fact, I can't remember seeing a film that touches on this community in any significant way.

For that, one must applaud Freimond, who shot the film entirely around the Oriental Plaza and the streets of Fordsborg. He captures the sense of community and the tone of one of Joburg's most interesting places.

I loved the detail and the vitality of his vision, and what sealed the deal for me was the wonderful sequences about the Sunday afternoon exodus to the Zoo Lake. It's a long-standing tradition, and Freimond uses that as the focus of newly recognised romance.

It's that kind of detail, that sense of intimacy and authenticity, which makes the film so resonant.

I hope local audiences will be smart enough to recognise how good this movie is. The fact that it made the Top Three of the weekly box office, surpassing as slew of Hollywood movies, tells us that South Africans recognise talent when they see it.

## Short Takes

Rampart ★★★

You need an information sheet to work out what this film is all about. The title, *Rampart*, alludes to the Rampart Police Department in downtown Los Angeles. It is an area populated with immigrants — some legal, mostly not. The film is set in the early 1990s, when the LA cops considered themselves untouchable, and police corruption was rife. Dave Brown (Woody Harrelson, pictured) has been on the force for 24 years. He sees himself as a righteous vigilante but, in fact, he is as corrupt as they come. When he is filmed



administering a brutal beating and exposed on TV, his corrupt buddies drop him. Harrelson's performance is mind-blowing, and *Rampart* has a strong cast, but it is so relentlessly sordid that I needed a hot shower after the screening.

The Sitter ★★★

Jonah Hill's *The Sitter* is foul-mouthed, hectic and outrageous. Hill (pictured), was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role in *Moneyball*, but in *The Sitter* he slips back into the cliché of the gormless fat guy. He plays Noah, who has taken on a job as a baby-sitter for three young kids. At the same time, a girl promises Noah that she will have sex with him if he brings drugs to her party. On impulse, he loads the youngsters into their mother's car and drives them to a drug-dealer. From that point on, the farce just



gets wilder, noisier, and more vulgar but not — alas! — any funnier. Only the dorks of the 21st century will enjoy it.

The Devil Inside ★★

Despite extremely negative reviews, this film about demonic possession raced to the top of the American box-office charts. Directors William Brent Bell and Matthew Peterman made the film for \$1-million but earned \$53-million. Filmed in "found footage" style, it tells the story of Isabella (Fernanda Andrade) who was a child when her mother killed three people in a state of demonic possession. As an adult, Isabella, wants to find what happened. Exorcism is a familiar theme, but *The Devil Inside* adds nothing to the genre. As Rolling Stone critic Peter Travers said: "*The Devil Inside* manages not only to scrape the barrel's bottom but to drill a hole in said bottom and funnel deeper into the scum." Amen! to that.

## Close-Up

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close  
★★★

**I**T'S not a great movie week, but the best of the bunch is *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a family drama built around the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001.

The film does not try to depict that tragedy. There are just a few, swift images of collapsing buildings and an image of a man tumbling through the air and that's it.

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel offers a compassionate view of a family trying to deal with an unimaginable tragedy.

The story begins in the aftermath of the attacks and focuses on Oskar Schell (Thomas Horn), who is sent home from school after the first explosion. Alone and afraid, Oskar hears six messages from his father, Thomas (Tom Hanks), on the home phone, each one more urgent, and when he sees TV footage of the Twin Towers collapsing, he knows his father is dead.

His sense of loss is intense, and Oskar starts searching for something that might allow him to make sense of the catastrophe. While searching in a cupboard, he accidentally breaks a vase. Among the fragments he finds an envelope on which is written "Black". He finds a key inside, but there is no other information.

Oskar decides to trace the owner of the key. The effect of his search is to trace all the places to which he went with his father. Those memories gradually erode the stark fact of his father's death.

As he travels all over the city, he retrieves all the goodness and kindness of their family life together. In the process, he meets people who must deal with their own anger and sadness. But Oskar's determination also leads him into encounters with people who have lost their way in their lives.

Initially, they are just names and addresses on Oskar's list, but as he talks to them, they take a fresh look at their own lives. Just as his father challenged Oskar to

look for "the lost sixth borough of New York", the people he meets start looking for the places and people they have lost.

The film is superbly cast. Viola Davis and Jeffrey Wright play a couple who struggle to overcome the rift in their relationship. Veteran actress Zoe Caldwell plays the grandmother, who has a bitter secret. But the most delicate and powerful performance comes from an old man (Max von Sydow) who was a child during the bombing in World War 2, and since then has not been able to speak. He is the angry old man that Oskar could become.

The story is artfully crafted — a complex puzzle that slowly reveals the truth — but both book and film have been criticised for the simplistic way in which they draw the characters to a true understanding of who they are and what their lives have become.

Too many coincidences and too many happy accidents make the film seem contrived. But the acting is faultless and the intense vulnerability Horn makes Oscar a believable character. He makes the story resonate with you as you leave the cinema, even though that buzz is likely to fade as soon as you hit traffic on the way home.



SENSE OF LOSS: Max von Sydow and Thomas Horn in 'Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close'

