

SIMON & I

A film by Beverley Palesa Ditsie and Nicky Newman



a challenging, provocative, and unconventional film about life in Southern Africa in the presence of HIV/AIDS



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52 minutes, South Africa

synopsis

Simon & I recounts the lives of two giants in the South African gay and lesbian liberation movement, Simon Nkoli and the film maker herself, Bev Ditsie. The story is narrated by Bev, both as a personal statement and a political history, as she charts their relationship through good times and bad. Their converging and diverging lives around the central issues of gay activism and HIV/AIDS are revealed using a mixed format of interviews, archive footage of main events, stills and newspaper clips.



Chief role players such as Judge Edwin Cameron and Zackie Achmat are interviewed and give credence to Bev's portrayal of Simon Nkoli as a world leader, whose own history as a political activist legitimized gay activism in South Africa.

But, with Simon's HIV-positive status and regular illnesses, the increasing emphasis on issues to do with AIDS resulted in a loss of momentum within the gay and lesbian liberation movement itself. Bev recounts how she started to feel marginalized from the organization, both as a woman and as a black person.

Bev pieces together the story of her personal and political journey from her days as a lonely and isolated Tomboy in Soweto to her present occupation as an activist, filmmaker and musician. She met Simon when, aged 17, she attended the first meeting of the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) where she remembers how impressed she was by his leadership qualities and political clout. He had just been released after four years in detention.

At the first Pride March the following year in 1990, Simon made the speech that was to have an everlasting impact on Bev. She saw that her oppression was two-fold, first as a lesbian and then as black. She aligned herself to Simon's personal struggle when he declared "I must fight for both".

The film bears witness to the role of the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE) in lobbying for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Bill of Rights and ultimately in the new Constitution.

Nevertheless, after the fourth International Conference on Women in Beijing, Bev left GLOW, angry that members of her own movement did not see why they should be represented at



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such an event. She and Simon became estranged as he increasingly came to represent people living with AIDS.

Reconciled shortly before his death in 1998, these formidable characters bear witness to the enormous sacrifices required of human rights activism. This searing testament shows us two different, powerful personalities, but only one struggle.

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principal credits

Directors	Beverley Palesa Ditsie, Nicky Newman
Producer	Nicky Newman
Cinematographer	Nicky Newman
Sound	Leslie Mntambo
Editor	Michael Brian Waugh
Music	Beverley Ditsie, Hugh Masebenza
Professional Support	Jakob Høgel, John Webster
Production Company	See Thru Media

festivals

Int'l Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam
Hot Docs Documentary Film Festival
Vues D'Afrique Festival, Oxfam prize for Best Documentary by Women Filmmakers
San Francisco Gay & Lesbian Film Festival
Chicago Gay & Lesbian Film Festival
Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival
Reel Affirmations Film Festival

about the directors

Besides her well-documented career as a human rights activist, Bev Ditsie has worked in the television and film industry as a director, producer, presenter, actor and voice-over artist. She has directed countless music videos and her TV directing work includes *Love Life Games- Love life SA*, *Take 5* and *Arts Unlimited Diary*. She has also contributed stories and columns to various publications, such as *Curve* and *Outright*. *Simon & I* is the first documentary she has directed.



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director's comments

Briefly describe what your film is essentially about?

The film is a personal journey through the gay and lesbian history in South Africa, and in particular the relationship between myself and gay and HIV/AIDS activist, Simon Nkoli.

What was your experience in the making of your film?

It's been exhilarating and frightening. The story is so deeply personal, that there have been many times when I thought I couldn't go through with it. It has been very hard. At the same time, it's exciting to finally do it. I am facing my past, documenting it and putting it to rest. I have really learned a lot, and still continue to learn.

How would you describe the value of the message embodied in your film to potential audiences?

The message of the film is that self-acceptance and acceptance of others is important. We need to learn not to judge or mistreat people just because they are different to us. We can't all be the same. Our differences have to be celebrated, not rejected.

How would you describe your film in the context of HIV/AIDS?

The film pays tribute to Simon Nkoli, who was one of the first African gay men to come out about his sexuality and his HIV status. He was also on the forefront of HIV/AIDS education in the townships of Gauteng before he died of an Aids-related illness. Because HIV/AIDS was considered a gay man's disease, the film also attempts to show how the gay and lesbian community has responded to the disease.

Please provide any further comments relevant to the film project.

I believe that it is important for all of us to tell our history, lest it be forgotten - especially in our country, where the birth of a new democracy has created a need to forget and disregard our past. The technical assistance that has been provided has helped us with the script and the concept of the film. It's been amazing. There's a wealth of great stories in our country and sub-continent, and I hope that *STEPS for the Future* opens up many more doors for other filmmakers, young and old, to tell these stories.

victors not victims...

Southern Africa is the new centre of the global AIDS crisis.

Nowhere else in the world is it spreading as fast as in this region. Statistics are alarming. The average life expectancy of around 65 years is said to drop to 40, or maybe 30, within ten years. Every second fifteen year old in South Africa could die by 2010. Already every fourth university student in many of the universities throughout the region is HIV positive. There are 12 million AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa.



This is the part of the story which has been receiving all the attention.

But there is another one, happening now, which has another focus, other than the impending tragedy. Most people are still living with HIV, not dying from AIDS. 'Steps for the Future' aims to show the living rather than the dying,



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and their incredible struggle to avert the tragedy.

Living with HIV is an incredibly intimate and personal experience, and yet it is an experience that needs to be shared if families, communities and the public at large are to fully understand the reality and consequences of the disease.

This understanding is needed in order to demystify and destigmatise HIV and those affected by it, and thus remove the veil of secrecy that arguably sustains the virus' spread.

Many of the best professionals in the international field of documentary filmmaking collaborated to create a collection of challenging and meaningful documentaries that will resonate throughout the region, and inform the world about life in Southern Africa in the midst of HIV/AIDS.

These stories will affirm that...



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