

CAPE TOWN 11-13 FEB 2010

FREE AT LAST FILM FESTIVAL

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CAPE TOWN, 11 – 13 February & JOHANNESBURG, 11 February 2010

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Twenty years ago, after having spent 27 years behind bars, Nelson Mandela, the world's most famous prisoner walked out of Victor Verster Prison near Paarl. Awe and disbelief was on the faces of many, expressions of overwhelming joy, people burst into the streets across the country, brandishing posters and flags banned for decades. Mandela has become an icon and moral authority of near universal appeal and South Africa a young democracy – reasons to celebrate this anniversary with some of the best films made about Mandela and the Anti-Apartheid movement, as well as raw footage that will transport audiences back to that hot Sunday in February 1990.

“By 3.30, I began to get restless, as we were already behind schedule. I told the members of the Reception Committee that my people had been waiting for me for twenty-seven years and I did not want to keep them waiting any longer (...).” (Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Little, Brown & Company, London, 1994, page 552 & 553)

For decades, news coming out of South Africa focused on forced removals, repressive, racist laws, massacres, raids, torture, imprisonment. Headlines filled with tales of violence and suffering: Sharpeville, Soweto, Steve Biko and Ruth First, Matthew Goniwe and David Webster, the State of Emergency, letter bombs and hit squads.

On 2 February 1990, at the opening of parliament, President FW de Klerk surprised not only his own cabinet but the world at large when he announced the unbanning of banned political organizations and the unconditional release of political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela.

“At first I could not really make out what was going on in front of us, but when I was within 150 feet or so, I saw a tremendous commotion and a great crowd of people: hundreds of photographers and television cameras and newspeople as well as several thousands of well-wishers. I was astounded and a little bit alarmed. I had truly not expected such a scene; at most, I had imagined that there would be several dozen people, mainly the warders and their families (...).”

On 5 May 1962, together with Cecil Williams, a theatrical producer who had provided a front for Mandela to act as his driver, Mandela was arrested outside Howick, in Natal. Williams enabled Mandela to defy his banning order and travel the country. Initially, Mandela was arrested for leaving South Africa illegally and for incitement to strike but once most of the ANC leadership had been arrested at Lilliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, he ended up being charged for sabotage, sharing the dock with Ahmed Kathrada, Denis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, Andrew Mlangeni, Elias Motsoaledi, Walter Sisulu and Raymond Mhlaba, facing the death sentence. Mandela, a lawyer by profession and skilled orator, turned the Rivonia Trial into a political trial, a platform from which he justified the ANC's position and its shift to the armed struggle:

“I am the First Accused (...) During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal, which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Sent to Robben Island for life imprisonment like thousands of others, Mandela and his fellow prisoners endured harsh conditions, manual labour, ruthless warders and even torture. The apartheid government expected the world and South Africa to forget about the “Black Pimpernel” and his comrades.

By the 1980s, however, Mandela had become the world's most prominent prisoner, the focus of many “Release Mandela” campaigns and rallies. International pressure, the fall of the Berlin Wall, which ushered in the end of the bipolar world order, burning townships and more and more ungovernable areas in South Africa lead to secret “talks about talks” between the banned ANC and the Nats government, resulting in South Africa's “glasnost”.

“Whithin twenty feet or so of the gate, the cameras started clicking, a noise that sounded like some great herd of metallic beasts. (...) It was a happy, if slightly disorienting, chaos. When a television crew thrust a long, dark and furry object at me, I recoiled slightly, wondering if it were some newfangled weapon developed while I was in prison. Winnie informed me that it was a microphone.”

After decades of being the international pariah, banned from political, economic, cultural and sporting arenas, South Africa suddenly became a beacon of hope, a symbol for people's power.

“When I was among the crowd I raised my right fist, and there was a roar. I had not been able to do that for twenty-seven years and it gave me a surge of strength and joy. (...). As I finally walked through those gates to enter a car on the other side, I felt - even at the age of seventy-one - that my life was beginning anew. My ten thousand days of imprisonment were at last over.”

Who is this man, the world was campaigning, picketing and waiting for? How did the liberation movements fight, mobilize and justify their struggle against oppression?

A unique selection of renowned local and international filmmakers and award-winning non-fiction films, as well as the raw historical footage of the day of Mandela's release, take us back to one of the most significant historical events of the 20th century. They remind us of the pain, sacrifices, but also the joys, the indomitable spirit, the victories and the humanity that characterized the struggle.

The challenges facing South Africa remain significant two decades after Mandela’s long walk lead him out of jail – the reasons to celebrate, however, do too.

At a time where some miss the collective consciousness, the magic of the early 90s, the unity in purpose of the struggle years, and the electrifying mood, the excitement, the air filled with hope and possibilities, brotherhood and goodwill, these films provide insight and inspiration, allow audiences to take stock, draw parallels, reflect and debate, relieve South Africa’s “Zero Hour” and make sure that we never forget what it took. Amandla!

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