

# the writing studio

## INTERVIEWS: WRITER-DIRECTOR SUNU GONERA

### **AFRICA'S PETER PAN** **By Daniel Dercksen**

Vuka-award-winning director Sunu Gonera, who is now calling the shots and living in Los Angeles, returned to Cape Town last year to film the South African segment of Nassiri's 'Love Sees No Colour' world tour music video, before heading back home to attend the world premiere of his debut feature film *Pride*, now showing nationwide.

When you meet Gonera, his charismatic, charming and radiant personality might seem overwhelming, but soon one feels at home when stealing a few moments talking to him at his offices during his busy schedule.

He is very much an African Peter Pan, relishing in his boyhood dreams as he slowly comes to terms with growing up, being a family man with kids, and tackling fame.

Gonera hopes that he will never grow out of this 'Peter Pan' syndrome.

"I feel that I need to be more childlike in my faith, and not to lose it," he says. "I need to dream bigger. I always want to maintain that childlike faith of believing that anything is possible. But there's also maturity on the other side where you learn to realise that success is a progressive realisation of a worthwhile dream. It's not an overnight thing. I'm learning patience, which I am very short on."

His dream of becoming a film director began as a ten-year-old boy growing up in the townships in Zimbabwe.

Hailing from the townships of Zimbabwe during the time of the Civil War, Sunu has managed in a very short space of time, to carve out a career which sounds less like a real life and more like a movie. A scholarship at a private school in Zimbabwe and excellent sporting prowess opened doors to international travel and ultimately another scholarship to the University of Cape Town, where he completed a degree in Organizational Psychology.

"I said to my dad that one day I'm going to be a movie star, and buy him his own Mercedes Benz," laughs Gonera. "It's always been the end goal. Film is like a calling for me, it's more than just making movies. For me film touches on everything I love, the creative and the commercial side of things. I was a banker for two years and now I'm a creative person. Now I feel I can merge both worlds perfectly."

Growing up in Zimbabwe during a time of warfare has had a profound influence on his life and his work

"Film becomes your escape, but also now, in all my work it becomes a thing that informs my decisions. When you are writing a script or when you are shooting a film, you really do draw deeply into your experiences as a child. For me particularly, coming from Africa, and war torn Africa, there's also that sense of realism that I try and bring to my work. Like Oliver Stone said: 'A troubled childhood makes for great material'."

Gonera finds it a blessing that he grew up in Africa, and that it gives him "a unique emotional basis which to draw material from."

"Growing up as a kid in the townships, I wanted to be somebody, to do something with my life," he says. "I think that naturally comes out, even in the commercials, in my movies, the underdog that achieves their dream."

There were several influences that impacted on his worldview. He grew up with Old Testament stories, and watching westerns and Bruce Lee movies when he was a child.

"All the epic stories has always been the big thing in my mind," he says. "When you think of the Bible, and the epic stories, and westerns, there's that same sense of scale."

Successful sporting achievements and a lucrative banking career were quickly overtaken by his long-term dream of acting and making movies. Gonera quickly worked his way up in the film industry, and within three short years garnered several prestigious directing awards, that were the result not just of his refreshing talent, but also of his courage, diligence and persistence.

After Gonera forming his own company Faith Creations with Diana Keam in 2003, he co-produced his first feature film, an English film called *Out on a Limb*.

Dubbed in the world of commercials' as one of the finest directing talents, he continued to produce a body of work with a unique voice that has inspired such prestigious clients as Nike, VW, Coca Cola and U.S Tennis Association to mention a few.

His short film *Riding with Sugar*, based on his own full-length, feature script, screened at Cannes in 2006. In June of the same year, he beat out several more seasoned Hollywood directors and landed his first full length feature directing assignment with Lionsgate.

Five months later, Gonera sold his home in South Africa, and moved his wife and kids to Hollywood to make his feature directorial debut on *Pride*.

Taking a look back at Gonera's life, one can imagine the honesty and insight that he is able to bring to a story about an underdog black swim team who through determination, passion and burning ambition came to realize their dreams.

Based on true events, *Pride* tells the story of Jim Ellis (played by Oscar nominee Terence Howard), a charismatic schoolteacher in the 1970s who changed lives forever by founding and coaching an African-American swim team in one

of Philadelphia's roughest neighbourhoods.

"It's hard doing a film about someone's life when that person's still alive," Gonera admits. "It's a huge responsibility. As a first-time feature-film director, the cast, the crew, the studio, and the subject of the movie - the man himself - have all been fantastic partners for me on this venture. I couldn't have asked for more."

"It was a life changing experience," he says of his Hollywood debut. "It helped me to open up my mind. You are working with stars, big sets and studios. It was really tough, but I will not exchange the experience for anything. It was also one of the most joyous moments in my life, realising that dreams do come true. To see it coming to fruition, it's out of this world."

"I just went in with the attitude that I want to learn from the world's best," he says. "I'm chasing that, and bringing the African soul into that."

Although his role of filmmaker is mapped out and he set on the road of success, Gonera firmly believes that he hasn't achieved anything yet.

"I am just getting started on this journey. I want to make, many, many films. I've got big films that I want to make. I want to make Ben Hur type films," he says. "I've got a long term dream of starting a big film school in South Africa where I can bring in the top filmmakers in the world as guest lecturers, and top actors. It's a big passion of mine. There's so much that I want to do. I feel that I am only getting started."

He also believes that you have to be "honest with what it is you want."

"I feel most people step out of their frame when someone else they think is bigger than them comes into the room. Bernie Mac, it was something he said which defined what I have always lived: 'Don't ever step out of your frame for anybody.' You can come on the frame next to me and both of us can shine, but don't expect me to come out of my frame for you. It also what Nelson Mandela talked about, we shrink ourselves hoping to try and fit in; that our living small doesn't make anyone else bigger. I always feel by living big you inspire people to feel big. Ones that don't see it, will eventually see it.

Now that *Pride* is completed, Gonera and his team are looking forward to the film's reception among audiences. While many of those moviegoers won't have previously heard of Ellis and his accomplishments, Gonera hopes that his story will resonate with them precisely for that reason. "What I love about this story is that it's about an ordinary man," the director says. "It's not like telling the story of Ray Charles or someone that's famous. This is an ordinary man, a schoolteacher. Every ordinary person out there who sees this movie will think, 'I can make a difference.' And hopefully this movie will inspire them to try."

The future looks bright for this talented filmmaker. In development is *Church Boy* with Lionsgate, journeying Franklin's journey from troubled teenager to regular churchgoer and top selling artist who changed the face of contemporary gospel by introducing elements of R&B, hip-hop, rock and pop.

In addition Gonera is writing and directing the complex crime drama *Bloodline* for Morgan Freeman and Lori McCreary's Revelations Entertainment, as well as adapting the book *Karoo Boy* with Videovision for Ananth Singh and Helena Spring. Also in the pipeline is Mike Van Graan's *Green Man Flashing*, which was optioned by Gonera's partner, Diana Keam.

"I feel that we have got so much to give in Africa. We've got so much! Our stories, our energy, our faith, the unique emotions we have, the languages. It will be great if South Africans will learn to look out more rather than looking in."

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