

Raising the BAR

March 3 2013 at 09:20am

It must annoy a film crew immensely to tell them their movie is so good that it doesn't look local. In a country producing Oscar winners, there is still an outdated notion that South African films are second rate. Yet it's the first thing I think when I start watching *Fanie Fourie's Lobola*, where even the title suggests a slapstick, slapdash kind of movie.

By the end I've laughed, cringed and snivelled a little as the love between an Afrikaner and his Zulu girlfriend overcomes family resistance.

The hero is panel beating, browbeaten Fanie (Eduan van Jaarsveldt), whose stoically racist mother sees white superiority as the natural order. For a dare, Fanie invites Dinky Magubane (Zethu Dlobo) to his brother's whiter-than-white wedding. She agrees, if he returns the favour and goes to her house to stop her father trying to marry her off to a smarmy black diamond.

When they walk into church together for his brother's wedding, the chilling silence conveys a thousand condemnations without a single word. It's the age-old tale of a cross-cultural clash with racial prejudices on either side. A *West Side Story* for Soweto.

As Fanie and Dinky accidentally fall in love, their beliefs and expectations are challenged. Then Fanie must negotiate the intricacies of lobola, set impossibly high for a white boy with no prospects. When he fails, his jaundiced mother tells him lobola has proved he isn't African. With a breaking heart he replies: "If we're not African, what are we doing here?"

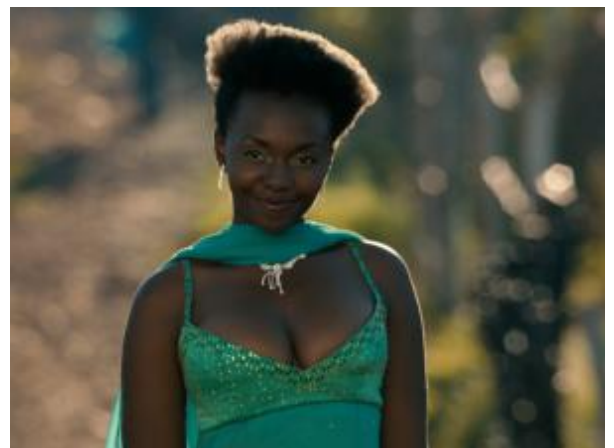
It has a happy ending, of course, as both families learn lessons that guide them back on the path to the rainbow nation we all once expected to achieve. It's a film of warmth and humour tempered with poignancy, beautifully filmed and backed by an imaginative and proudly South African soundtrack.

Director Henk Pretorius probably suppresses a sigh when I say it's so good it could be international. "There have been some huge successes on a tiny budget so it doesn't have to be about money," he says. "Whether it's a large or a small budget it's about how you manage it. It needs to end up being seen on screen, not wasted."

Producer Lance Samuels says the financial backers weren't skint with their cash. "They didn't say it's good enough for the local market, let's leave it there. It was always in the back of our minds to be world class."

The screenplay by Pretorius and Janine Eser is based on a book by Nape à Motana, a Sepedi journalist who at 67 is enjoying belated fame. He originally wrote *Fanie Fourie's Lobola* as a film, but turned it into a novel when film-makers shunned it. Now it's come a full circle. "I was thrilled because to have your book chosen for a movie is awesome," Motana says.

I ask if he's saddened that the plot remains so relevant because people are still unaccepting of mixed



relationships. "I lived many years under Apartheid and it fascinated me that there were lots of forbidden relationships. I know attitudes take a long time to change, but perhaps the next generation who have grown up together will be different. But for us, the older generation, well, I haven't given up but I have learnt to accept it."

The leading actors, Eduan van Jaarsveldt and Zethu Dlomo, have never dated across the colour chart. "I just relate better to black people and I can speak my own language with them. I have lots of friends of different races but I relate better to my own. I find black men grrrrgh," Dlomo says. Dlomo is gorgeous. Her character Dinky is tough but not untouchable, with an independent streak that rejects lobola as a concept championed by men who see women as commodities to be bought and sold.

It's an interesting debate, with the film presenting lobola as a way of showing respect to the future wife and her family, rather than trading a piece of property.

"As a heterosexual white man in South Africa today what I took away with my liberal leanings is that it's not about cows or money, it's about respect," says Van Jaarsveldt. "If you can't be a man about it and respect your wife and family, you are not worthy to marry this woman."

Dlomo relishes the limelight, saying she's similar to her character and shares the same confidence. "We are both go-getters who go for what we want. I said 'family, I want to act' and I followed my dreams." In September she will start training at the New York Film Academy.

Van Jaarsveldt says he's the polar opposite to Fanie. "I have a vision and I know where I'm going and I've always had that drive. But I try to be honest and Fanie is that. Honesty, sincerity and loyalty are his best characteristics."

For him the clash isn't about race, but culture, and every country with a mixed population shares those issues. "It's about finding your place in the world you live in, even in a place as crazy as South Africa. It's about finding out who you are and accepting yourself."

Fanie Fourie's Lobola opened on Friday and the team hopes it will be such a smash that a major distributor will take it international. The response at the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles was amazing, says Eser. "People said they felt like they knew these characters and they didn't believe there could be a romantic comedy from South Africa because we are seen as a one-issue country."

The movie's title may include a word most of the world won't understand, but it's a story that should touch everyone.

