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South Africa in the Hollywood eye

The nation has become a rising beacon post-apartheid and the film industry is taking note, with home-grown filmmakers and their foreign counterparts sharing the spotlight.

TRIUMPH: Clint Eastwood's "Invictus," with Morgan Freeman, left, and Matt Damon, tells of South Africa's victory in the 1995 Rugby World Cup. (Keith Bernstein / Warner Brothers)

Photos: South Africa's cinematic history

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Just 20 years ago, South Africa was commonly perceived as one of the most polarized, ill-starred places on the planet. Shackled by the racist system of apartheid, or legally enforced segregation, it was a nation divided against itself and shunned by the rest of the world as a pariah state. ¶ Today the world is looking at South Africa for very different reasons. This summer the country will become the first African nation to host the World Cup soccer tournament. As one of the most politically stable, democratic and relatively prosperous countries on a troubled continent, South Africa is regarded as a model by many of its neighbors. It's also a growing tourist destination. ¶ Another influential outside party is taking a renewed interest in South Africa these days: Hollywood. A century after D.W. Griffith filmed his 13-minute black and white silent fable "The Zulu's Heart," South Africa and the U.S. film industry appear to be entering a new phase in their complex, sometimes tortuous relationship. ¶ This year, at least three films with one type of Hollywood connection or another to South Africa have opened or will be opening in theaters. Like a great many of the films made by South Africans in recent decades, they not surprisingly are preoccupied with race and class relations, either as text or subtext.

The most unconventional is last summer's hit "District 9," directed and co-written by Neill Blomkamp, a native South African now based in Vancouver. Produced by Peter Jackson, it's a science fiction tale about persecuted space aliens that's also a thinly veiled allegory of South Africa under apartheid.

Steve Jacobs' "Disgrace" was adapted from Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee's tough novel and released this fall. It stars John Malkovich as a middle-age Cape Town professor who becomes exiled within his own country as he adjusts to the challenges of post-apartheid's topsy-turvy social realities. The movie received substantial financing from government sources in Australia, where Coetzee now lives.

Anna-Maria Monticelli, the screenwriter and producer of "Disgrace" (and wife of its director), said she believes that the film speaks to issues of tolerance, reconciliation and socioeconomic justice that resonate both within and outside South Africa. "It is for smart people, this film," she said. "It's pushing you to go places where you've not necessarily been before and to understand."

Opening next month will be Clint Eastwood's "Invictus," a historical drama about the upset win by South Africa in the 1995 Rugby World Cup, which helped unite blacks and whites during the crucial early months of Nelson Mandela's presidency. It stars Morgan Freeman as Mandela and Matt Damon as Francois Pienaar, the team captain.

In an interview, one of the film's producers, Lori McCreary, who also co-produced the 1993 South Africa-set film "Bopha!" -- which her Revelations Entertainment production company partner Freeman directed -- called the country "a great place to make films." Among the factors she cited were a favorable currency exchange rate, a variety of arresting shooting locations and one of Africa's deepest pools of talent. More than 200 of the 240 crew members and 62 of 70 actors who worked on "Invictus" were South African, she added.

"The U.S. is more interested in South Africa than at any point probably since the '94 election," McCreary said. "The world is looking at South Africa." As for the coincidences of timing and subject matter between "Invictus" and this summer's World Cup, she said, "I wish I could say it was planned. I think it's fortuitous for us."

A fourth film, Anthony Fabian's "Skin," a British-South African production that recently opened in U.S. theaters, relates the improbable-but-true story of Sandra Laing, a South African woman whose mixed-race ancestry wreaked havoc on her sense of personal identity and her family relations. It stars Sophie Okonedo and Sam Neill as the girl's conflicted father.

These foreign and semi-foreign films join a growing number of home-grown South African movies grappling with the country's painful race-relations legacy, including

Gavin Hood's "Tsotsi" (2005), shot in Johannesburg and a Soweto township, about the enduring hardships and disillusionments of the post-apartheid era. Adapted from a novel by playwright Athol Fugard, it won the Academy Award for best foreign language film.

South Africa appears eager to attract more Hollywood and foreign production. Cape Town Film Studios, Cape Town Film Studios billed as the first Hollywood-quality production studio to be built in southern Africa, is under construction and expects to produce its first movie next year.

Located on the outskirts of Cape Town, the new private facility will comprise 75,000 square feet of sound stages, plus support facilities, workshops and production offices, said Nico Dekker, chief executive officer. Dekker, who will be visiting several Hollywood film companies this month, said the studios would provide a base for South African filmmakers and visiting crews. It is receiving financial support from the municipal, provincial and federal governments, a mark of the country's enthusiasm in promoting film production.

"If you go 10 years back, there were hardly any foreign features shooting in South Africa or doing post-production or production of any kind," Dekker said. "We are now entering the more mature phase where South Africa can offer the full spectrum of production and even talent."

Dekker specifically credits "District 9" with showing "our colleagues in Hollywood" that a mainly South African cast and crew could make a \$30-million feature film with the look of a \$100-million movie. He said the movie served as "a big wake-up call" for what South African filmmakers, both independently and in league with outsiders, may be capable of in the post-apartheid era.

Uneven portrayals

Hollywood's attention toward South Africa has waxed and waned in the century since Griffith shot his short film, which the independent filmmaker Peter Davis in his 1996 book "In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa" named as the first Western-made movie about South Africa. The movie is a caricatured story of a "good" Zulu, a noble savage who rescues a Boer mother and daughter from being killed by a band of barbaric "bad" Zulus.

Given Griffith's own checkered reputation as a racist and Ku Klux Klan sympathizer, it was perhaps inevitable that his film about South Africa would set an uneven tone for the country's relationship with Hollywood.

A number of problematic Hollywood film genres, notably the black-white "buddy" movie such as "In the Heat of the Night" with Sidney Poitier (1967) have cropped up in films dealing with South Africa. In "The Wilby Conspiracy" (1975), Poitier was paired as a South African revolutionary who teams with a white Englishman (Michael Caine) to thwart a racist Afrikaner cop.

This black-white friendship trope resurfaced during the end-of-apartheid period in such films as Richard Attenborough's fact-based "Cry Freedom" (1987), which focuses on the relationship between the white journalist Donald Woods (Kevin Kline) and the slain black activist Steve Biko (Denzel Washington); and Euzhan Palcy's "A Dry White Season" (1989), about the call to conscience of a white school teacher (Donald Sutherland).

Critics and scholars differ over whether such parallels point to an inventive repackaging of familiar genres or a myopic Hollywood projection of one country's social reality onto that of another. Critics have argued that friendships and social contact between blacks and whites during the apartheid epoch were almost unknown and these relationships are misleading and anachronistic. And since these movies were made almost entirely by white and non-South African directors, the argument continues, blacks had no opportunity to offer an alternative cinematic vision of race relations.

The other criticism made by Davis and others is that Hollywood, foreign and expatriate white South African filmmakers related their South African stories almost exclusively through the eyes of white protagonists while relegating black Africans to the role of "exotics" and ciphers, typically as villains, noble savages or faithful servants -- the same roles they tended to occupy in Hollywood.

Perhaps no movie suggests the difficulties of representing South Africa in film, let alone of predicting how global audiences will respond to those depictions, better than "The Gods Must Be Crazy" (1980). Jamie Uys' film, shot in Botswana and South Africa, about an isolated bushman's picaresque journey to get rid of a Coca-Cola bottle that's been dropped from an airplane, was an international smash that spawned several sequels. Yet the debate goes on over whether the film panders to an image of black Africans as

childlike and naive or whether the movie offers a smartly satiric and prescient view of African racial politics and creeping globalization.

During the transition from apartheid, at least one South African director, Darrell Roodt, turned out a number of movies that skillfully applied a white native son's liberal social conscience to an increasingly Hollywood-friendly template. Roodt's output includes "A Place of Weeping" (1986), "Jobman" (1990), the musical "Sarafina!" (1992), with Whoopi Goldberg, and a remake of "Cry, the Beloved Country" (1995), based on Alan Paton's classic novel, with Richard Harris and James Earl Jones. More recently, with "Zimbabwe" (2008), Roodt turned his camera on the story of a young AIDS orphan struggling to survive with her brother in South Africa's imploding next-door neighbor.

Experience suggests that the impact of Hollywood on South African film culture may continue to be mixed. Adam Haupt, a senior lecturer at the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town, said that in the past, American film actors sometimes have been cast in roles that otherwise might've gone to South African performers. He questions whether successful South African filmmakers and actors may be tempted to leave home to pursue the Hollywood dream. And he asks whether Hollywood's relentless quest to market films to the widest possible global audiences will lead to a watering down of South African content.

Meanwhile, well-regarded contemporary South African (or partly South African) films such as "Tsotsi," Oliver Schmitz's "Hijack Stories" (2000), which raises questions about how U.S. gangster films influence African black male identity, and Ralph Ziman's "Jerusalema" (2008), based on the story of an underworld kingpin, usually struggle to elbow their way into the crowded, costly U.S. and European markets.

Hollywood has already left a heavy cultural footprint in South Africa, Haupt said. As a teenager, he grew up watching imported U.S. films and television hits such as "Miami Vice." "While the townships were burning, you were getting the latest TV shows." What's more, he said, a country that has produced writers such as Coetzee, Fugard and Nadine Gordimer, plus world-renowned musicians, actors and artists, doesn't need Hollywood to fill some imagined cultural vacuum.

But if nothing else, Hollywood's renewed attention suggests that a country that used to be "a world apart" (to borrow the title of Chris Menges' apartheid-era film) is advancing further into global consciousness. "I think it's a bit of a coming of age," Dekker said. "There's a spirit of like we're getting somewhere now."