

FILM REVIEW

John Trengove, dir. *The Wound*. Original title: *Inxeba*. 98 min. IsiXhosa, with English subtitles. South Africa. Indigenous Film Distribution and Kino Lorber, \$29.95.

In the South African film *Inxeba (The Wound)*, directed by John Trengove, a Xhosa initiation ritual provides the setting for a narrative of queer love and desire. Xolani and Vija, longtime lovers, meet each year on the mountain where they act as caregivers for newly circumcised initiates. This rhythm is disrupted when Xolani becomes caregiver for the initiate Kwanda, whose father has sent him to the mountain in hopes that initiation will stop Kwanda from bringing home “these rich boys from Joburg” and “locking themselves in his room.” The plot inverts tropes of gay sexual awakening. The initiate Kwanda embodies cosmopolitanism and “out” gayness, while the older caregivers Vija and Xolani keep their longstanding relationship secret. The young cosmopolitan does not, however, show his elders the way to gay liberation; instead, Kwanda’s attempts to convince Xolani to embrace a gay identity propel the three main characters toward a violent confrontation.

For several months after its release, it was easier to watch *Inxeba* in the United States, where it was available on Netflix, than in South Africa, where a group of critics led by the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (Contralesa) successfully petitioned to change the film’s classification to one generally reserved for pornography. In June 2018, a judicial ruling restored the original rating, returning the film to mainstream theaters. Contralesa’s objections included the portrayal of a secret ritual (particularly troubling in a film by a white director), the depiction of behavior that objectifies women, and—most importantly—arguments that the depiction of gay sex during the initiation process contaminates a sacred space. These objections draw on enduring conceptions of sex as a form of pollution in isiXhosa-speaking communities, but they also contain specific elements of homophobia. Despite historical research to the contrary, significant parts of the South African public see queer desire as fundamentally incompatible with African culture. This tension animates the movie’s plot; the liminal space of the initiation ceremony enables queer intimacies, while simultaneously initiating boys into a manhood predicated on heterosexuality.

Despite criticism from Contralesa and other self-proclaimed advocates of tradition, *Inxeba* offers a compelling depiction of the power of customary practice. New initiates claim a manhood that bolsters them against the poverty and social exclusion faced by many black residents of the Eastern Cape. Although Xolani's factory job places him in a position of relative economic comfort, he, too, finds purpose in these yearly rituals, which connect him not only to his lover but also to a world of homosocial intimacy in which he occupies a role of authority and expertise.

These pleasures, however, carry steep costs. The shared manhood of the mountain is constructed in significant part through the denigration of womanhood. Although women are almost entirely absent from *Inxeba*, effeminacy haunts the film. Other caregivers and initiates find Xolani's own softness suspicious, and the threat of violence is omnipresent. Kwanda's father blames his mother, who spoils him and wanted him to be circumcised in a hospital rather than on the mountain, for their son's homoerotic desires. Initiates and caregivers joke about finding a "warm vagina." Contralesa protested the film's portrayal of the objectification of women, but the construction of customary masculinity as dominance over female sexuality has as good a claim to the label of tradition as any other part of the initiation ritual.

The stakes of this form of manhood, however, have changed over the last century. Consumer objects present in the film remind viewers that while initiation may be traditional, it is not timeless. Mobile phones and sneakers also hint at the inequalities that define life beyond the mountain. Kwanda's fellow initiates steal his shoes, a marker of his softness (the others go barefoot), and envy his family's wealth, which offers forms of status and comfort that they cannot expect after they leave the mountain. The hostility is mutual. For Kwanda, the queer intimacies of the mountain pale in comparison to the pleasures of urban gay life—and his attempt to cajole or coerce Xolani into making the same choice proves fatal.

The film's controversy, its treatment of questions of significant public importance, and its warm critical reception will doubtless combine to make it the subject of sustained interest within film studies, queer studies, and related fields. Meanwhile, it provides an appealing way to introduce questions of gender, sexuality, and tradition within the classroom. Yet, particularly for those working outside of southern Africa, there is a risk that *Inxeba* might fit somewhat too neatly into preconceived narratives of African homophobia. On one reading, *Inxeba* is a condemnation of the strictures of tradition that condemn queer lives and relationships to permanent precarity at best, death at worst. In my own experience, this interpretation appeals to American students animated by the desire to protect the rights of sexual minorities.

On another reading, however, the movie's ending rejects the reduction of queer possibility to gay identity. Kwanda's presence—and the urban, out, gayness he signifies—threatens not only the homophobic masculinity espoused by his fellow initiates, but also the queer space that Vija and Xolani have forged together. Indeed, *Inxeba*'s most productive provocation within the classroom may be the refusal of a happy ending—not because queer

desire is doomed to annihilation, but because it confronts the audience with one of the constitutive contradictions of contemporary South Africa.

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