

2019 Encounters Documentary Fest lineup unveiled

The lineup of non-fiction films to be screened at the 21st Encounters South African International Documentary Festival has been unveiled. Documentary fans may look forward to an array of fascinating film subjects, from the front row of high fashion's runways to eavesdropping on an international racist conspiracy with South African ties and from a tribute to Pan-Africanism via Fela Kuti to Afrika Bambaataa's search for his routes in Kwa-Zulu-Natal.

The festival will be held from 6 to 16 June 2019 at the Rosebank Nouveau and The Bioscope Independent Cinema in Johannesburg and at The Labia Theatre, Bertha Bioscope at the Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education and Bertha Movie House in Cape Town.



Encounters will once again co-present several South African and international documentaries in association with the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF). The partnership has enabled filmmakers to premiere their films at both festivals for the last 14 years. From 6 to 16 June 2019, Cape Town and Johannesburg audiences will have the privilege to see this year's top-rated documentaries, each of them breaking new ground in non-fiction filmmaking.

Complex questions

The opening night film, coming just weeks after its world premiere in competition at Hot Docs, Toronto's holy grail of documentary film festivals, *Buddha In Africa* by South African director Nicole Schafer receives its joint South African premiere at Encounters and the 40th DIFF.

This delicately observed documentary is about a Malawian teenager in a Chinese Buddhist orphanage in Africa, who finds himself torn between his African roots and Chinese upbringing. The film focuses on Enock, a young teenager caught between his traditional culture, his dreams of becoming a martial arts hero like Jet Li and the strict discipline of Confucianism. Set against the backdrop of China's growing influence on the African continent this essential film poses complex questions about race, imperialism, faith and culture and offers a subtle exploration of the impact of soft cultural power on the identity and interior life of a young boy and his community. Director Schafer says: "It's also about Africa's relations with other foreign nations, including the former colonisers. It's this idea that the key to the future of the continent's development is always held by outsiders and, that in order to succeed, we have to adapt to foreign value systems and policies. I think Enock's story challenges this idea in very refreshing ways."

From high fashion to the Rivonia Trial

You will find eye-popping spectacles as you're placed in the front row of high-fashion in Ian Bonhote and Peter Ettedgui's ravishing *McQueen*, a superbly crafted, emotionally wrenching and fully dimensional portrait of ill-fated British fashion designer Alexander McQueen. A working-class gay boy from a housing estate, his phenomenal storming of the walls of the ever-so-trendy world of the demi-monde is fascinating in itself. And the film, like his designs, is scorchingly outspoken, thrilling, troubling and tinged with tragedy. Nominated for a Bafta for both Best Documentary and Outstanding British Film of the Year, the film won the 2019 LGBTQ Documentary of the Year from the Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association.

Cold Case Hammarskjöld won Danish provocateur Mads Brügger Best World Documentary Director at the Sundance Festival and received the same honour from this year's One World International Human Rights Documentary Festival. Brügger is infamous for his ironic and incisive trawling of the tainted and the corrupt. In 2011, his documentary *The Ambassador* was about the trading of diplomatic titles in Africa. Now he is back in Africa on the trail of the plotters and murderers of UN Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961. The dirt he uncovers should be creating a stench from London to South Africa via Belgium in what *Variety's* Owen Gleiberman described as "a singular experience that counts as one of the most honestly disturbing and provocative non-fiction films in years."

Another coup for this year's Encounters is the screening of *Talking About Trees*, director Suhaib Gasmalbari's elegant and bittersweet chronicle of the demise of Sudanese cinema and the group of retired directors hoping to revive their country's love of film. The film won the Glasshutte Prize for Best Documentary and the Panorama Audience Award at this year's Berlin International Film Festival before winning the Fipresci Prize and Jury Prize at the Istanbul International Film Festival in April. Charming and sad in equal measure, this is a paean to the love of cinema as two of the one-time luminaries of Sudanese cinema – Ibrahim Shaddad, Suleiman Mohamed and their cineaste friends Suliman Elnour and Eltayeb Mahdi – attempt to revive a cinema in a country where movies have been banned for years. A gorgeous experience for those who travel in the projector's beam and for those who prefer to watch movies in the comfort of their own streaming services, this eye-opening documentary may make them reconsider the value, both cultural and political, of being able to see something on the big screen.

Brazilian director Joel Zito Araújo's *My Friend Fela* had its World Premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam before going on to win the Paul Robeson Award for Best Film from the Diaspora at Burkina Faso's Fespaco, the world's pre-eminent African film festival. It explores the life of legendary Nigerian musician Fela Kuti from the perspective of his long-time friend Carlos Moore. Locating Fela's story firmly within the Black Consciousness movement, the film follows him from his first travels to London and New York – where he was confronted with his own blackness and African identity for the first time – to his ascent as one of the planet's most acclaimed musical talents and his eventual death in 1997. The resulting film is both a portrait of a remarkable man and a tribute to the Pan-African generation.

The State Against Mandela and the Others from French directors Nicolas Champeaux and Gilles Porte was in the official selection of this year's Cannes and was nominated for a Cesar, receiving acclaim for its unexpectedly refreshing take on the apartheid era's pivotal Rivonia trial. Drawing on a treasure trove of previously inaccessible 256 hours of audio recordings, the directing duo bring the archive clips alive using heavily stylised hand-drawn visuals by the Dutch graphic artist Oerd van Cuijlenborg, whose kinetic monochrome animations morph into pure abstraction in places. It is a remarkable

documentary and an inspired recycling of archival material. Weaving the reflections of those still alive into this artful fusion, the film brings emotive, enlightening perspective to a case that may be most famous for putting Mandela in prison for 27 years, but ruptured many other lives besides.

South African film feast

A feast of new South African films will also be screening at this year's Encounters. Following its North American premiere at Hot Docs this May, *Dying for Gold*, from directors Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa, is a devastating documentary centred around South Africa's biggest class-action lawsuit against the mining industry – a key force in shaping apartheid South Africa. Featuring a rich archive of footage from the colonial and apartheid eras, along with interviews with gold miners whose lives have been decimated by silicosis and tuberculosis, this forceful, vivid film clearly shows how Southern Africa's indigenous societies were destroyed in order to mine the world's richest deposits of gold at the cheapest possible price.

Equally as passionate is Susan Scott's *Stroop: Journey into the Rhino Horn War*, which made headlines as South Africa's breakout documentary of the year after winning over 17 international awards. As gripping and gruelling as the best of thrillers, it follows two inexperienced female filmmakers who travel the African bush and South-East Asia in search of answers to the random slaughter of the world's diminishing rhino population. Most recently, it won the sought-after Best of Festival award as well as Best Independent or Feature Film at the International Wildlife Film Festival (IWFF) in Montana.



SA's *Stroop* triumphs at International Wildlife Film Festival

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Paul Yule's tribute to a South African legend, *Americans, Mongrels & Funky Junkies – the Life of Jo Menell*, is an inspiring and affectionate tribute to a rare South African whose life of exile and global activism has aligned with many of the key moments and figures of the last 60 years. From Vietnam to Castro, from Hockney to Mandela, filmmaker Jo Menell's exceptional capacity to be both storyteller and subject offers an unusual and brilliant perspective into the complexity of our times.

This year's festival sees a rare screening of *Village Versus Empire* by Emmy-winning South African director Mark J Kaplan. Set on Jeju Island, off the coast of the Korean Peninsula – one of the 'Seven Wonders of Nature' with more Unesco Natural Heritage Sites than any single geographic location on planet earth. But, there is trouble in this paradise. Its fragile ecology and ancient shamanistic traditions are currently being devastated by the construction of a US naval base. Through the memories and actions of a range of political activists, religious leaders and artists the film explores the interconnectedness of past, present and future and the universal relevance of a village resisting an empire.

Zulu Return is the intriguing debut from emerging director gugulethu. The documentary follows the fallen hip-hop hero Afrika Bambaataa's spiritual quest to South Africa – the country he spent so much of his life honouring and defending through his music and activism – as he faces the effects of abuse allegations against him in his own life.

A Swiss Focus and more

Encounters will also feature a Swiss Focus, in association with Swiss Films and the Embassy of Switzerland in South Africa Consulate General of Switzerland in Cape Town. It will include *#Female Pleasure*, Barbara Miller's award-winning examination of the obstacles that stand in the way of female sexuality in the 21st century; Emmanuelle Antille's *A Bright Light: Karen and the Process*, a wild and enchanting journey in the footsteps of cult singer Karen Dalton, forgotten muse of the '60s; and *Chris the Swiss*, director Anja Kofmel's dazzling feature debut where she revisits the wildlife and strange death of her war reporter cousin with an innovative blend of animation and documentary.

Also in the lineup for this year's non-fiction film are *Beyond the Frontlines: Resistance and Resilience in Palestine*, a significant and powerful film from French author and feminist Alexandra Dols; German documentarian Karin

Jurschick's *Playing God*, which follows the struggle of the charismatic and controversial US attorney who, since 9/11, has been charged with the impossible task of assigning a dollar value to life when compensating victims of America's most tragic events. Lesotho breakthrough filmmaker Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese's beautifully poetic *Mother, I Am Suffocating, This Is My Last Film About You*; Jacqueline Gozland's moving tribute to the heydays of the Algerian cinematheque *My Story Is Not Written Yet*; as well as the premiere of progressive Soweto-born gay filmmaker Fanny Tsimong's *My Culture My Music*.

For the full schedule, go to www.encounters.co.za/schedule.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>