

Brett Michael Innes talks about his masterful adaptation of *Fiela Se Kind*

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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Brett Michael Innes is a bestselling author and award-winning filmmaker who wowed audiences with his poignant writing and directing debut film *Sink*, which was heralded by local critics as a 'breakout film that set a new standard for South African cinema' and saw him win the Safta for Best Film and Best Screenplay.

With *Fiela Se Kind*, an iconic South African classic, Brett Michael Innes delivers a heartbreaking story of the walls that separate us and the love that unites, telling the tale of a coloured woman in 1890s Southern Africa who finds a white toddler on her Karoo doorstep and raises him as her own.

Daniel Derksen shares a few thoughts with writer-director Brett Michael Innes about *Fiela Se Kind*.



■ What inspired you to adapt Dalene Matthee's iconic novel?

Having studied the novel in high school, the story resonated with me in a profound way and was one that I have always carried with me through life. I remember watching the adaptation that Katinka did around that same time and, while the film moved me, it was the words of Dalene that lingered with me for years to follow.

I think it was the resilience of Fiela that reminded me of my own mother and the confusion and isolation that Benjamin felt that reminded me of myself.

■ What was the challenge of adapting a story that is so familiar?

Expectation and comparison. These two things make it really difficult to stand on your own two feet but I knew this going in and can't say that I was scared of them. Part of my strategy for protecting our cast from them was to not announce the production or their attachment until well after we'd finished filming.

That way, the set was safe of these elements and they could just create without worrying about the world outside. People can be assholes online – with many specifically tagging actors on their social media to tell them that they think they're wrong for the role before they've even seen the work or radio DJs and press trying to start a turf war between the two Fielas when there wasn't one to begin with.

I wanted to protect them from this as long as I could.



■ ***Did you write the screenplay with any of the actors in mind?***

Kyknet was our primary investors on the film and, with that, had a large say in the casting of the film. Their encouragement was that, because Fiela was such a strong brand, we don't restrict ourselves to the 'it crowd' of actors but cast the net out wide. This is exactly what we did.

We saw the top actors in the land and virtually unknown actors as well, giving every one of them the chance to earn the role. Well known on the stage, Zenobia had never really done film work but her audition had that magic that really just stood out from the rest.

To be honest, there was only one actor in the final cast list who was on the one that I went into the audition process with, the rest of the actors just shone so brightly that I had no choice but to change my mind.

■ ***Was it a difficult process from page to screen?***

I can't say that it was a difficult process as I knew pretty early on what parts of the story I loved and wanted to show. The first draft of the screenplay was triggered from watching the stage play and it came out of me in a couple of weeks.

Creativity doesn't exist in a vacuum and we sometimes need outside influences to get the words to flow.



■ ***What do you think is the art of adaptation?***

The art of adaptation is not being scared to mess up or take a risk. The best film adaptations to me are ones where the screenwriter wasn't scared to discard entire sections from the novel in favour of finding the parts for the story that resonates with them.

This requires telling the story that resonates with you and being ok with the fact that some may not approve. If you try to squeeze everything in then all you have is a rushed experience that hits beats instead of making you feel.

In the case of this film, Elias and the 'grootvoet' storyline had less of an impact on me and it is probably the reason that narrative has less prominence in the script that I wrote.

■ ***They say that what makes a film original is not what you say, but how you express yourself as a filmmaker. In this sense, it is not only an original film but also seems to be a very personal film to you.***

This is a story of mothers and sons, those who are born and those who are chosen. It is a film about maternal love and male identity. It is my love letter to my own mother and I know that many of the actors used this in the same way, especially Wayne Smith who lost his mother a couple of weeks ahead of production.

As far as male identity goes, this is my love letter to the lost boys who, through the love of their mothers, are able to answer that difficult question of 'who am I?' For some, the question relates to their career choices while for others it is connected to being a father.

For me, that question was related to 'who I loved' and was a path that finally led me to the man that I get to marry next year. I accessed my own identity quest in order to find Benjamin's, one which was related to his race and name, and I believe this is what makes it feel so personal to me.



■ ***What do you think makes *Fiela Se Kind* such a significant South African story?***

The story of Fiela and Benjamin is a mirror to us as South Africans and, as we grow older, the reflection that it shows us of ourselves changes. When it first came out, it challenged the idea that love and a maternal relationship could exist across race lines.

This in and of itself was a bold statement given the time and context and both Dalene and Katinka should be credited with helping move the dial forward.

But time has passed and we as a nation have more wrinkles, with things that were once fresh are now starting to fade. But we also have the confidence that comes with maturity and the ability to find beauty in what we see reflected.

The myth of the rainbow nation, as with Father Christmas or the Easter Bunny, is being questioned and yet again Fiela is there to show us what we look like. Through her lens, we can see the frustrations that the Komoetie family will have felt at the time that they watched their mother search for Benjamin and, through Benjamin, we are yet again shown that ‘ticking all the boxes’ in the game of identity politics is a messy thing to do.

Love, identity, land, race – Fiela shows us all of these things and also reminds us that we all experience these things differently and truthfully.

■ ***From the opening scene, we immediately get a sense of being lost, brilliantly contrasted with the sense of isolation.***

We wanted to show these things visually and what better way than the geography of the world. The contrast of being lost in the Knysna Forest to the vast isolation of the Karoo does so brilliantly and we revisit this visually throughout the movie.



■ ***The film poignantly explores the cruelty of human nature versus the compassion of forgiveness.***

I think that both kindness and cruelty can exist in the same body and that humans are capable of both. I believe that forgiveness is a universal tool for breaking cycles of hurt but that it cannot be accessed at the expense of justice, especially when we unpack structural inequalities or horrific crimes.

I believe we show this in *Fiela Se Kind*, but also that we don't provide an answer on how to do this. To me, film is there to exchange this knowledge through emotion and not intellect so it is difficult.

■ ***The film has a hushed intensity that draws you into the world of the characters and when the story resolves itself, particularly the bond between Fiela and her child, it results in an emotional experience that is truly unforgettable. How difficult was it to maintain this balance?***

It's a tough line to tread because, if the payoff isn't there, then the entire experience of watching a film is pretty boring. I've also learnt that the power of the payoff in both *Sink* and *Fiela Se Kind* comes because the audience has been allowed to marinate in the world and the characters as opposed to just rushing them.

Now, this may not be everyone's preference in film but it's one that you can expect in one that I'm involved in; a slow-burn – which, if you are patient to stick around for, will deliver an intense emotional experience at the end.

■ ***The film also deals with loss of innocence, not only for Benjamin but all the characters.***

For me, it was important to explore the loss that the Komoetie family experienced when they, in essence, lost their mother to her pursuit of Benjamin. What that means on an individual level for Tollie, the brother who is overshadowed by Benjamin, and, on a group level, where privilege and structural inequality between groups can be felt.

The loss of a parent, the loss of a child, the loss of land, the loss of a name, all these things reach us in different ways and your experience of them in this film will be determined by the group that your race and gender place you in.

■ ***What inspired you to explore Fiela's darkness in this film, something that has never been approached in the novel, film or stage adaptations?***

Fiela has always been seen as holy, untouchable, Mother Mary or Lakshmi. She sits on a pedestal and can do no wrong. This portrayal makes for a very bland character and one that I struggle to resonate with so it was my goal to sprinkle some humanity (aka darkness) into her characterisation in this film.

Give her flaws, make her human and make her one of us. Likewise, I didn't want to demonise Elias or Barta but also show moments of kindness (all be they small) in the way that they are. I had a similar approach to the crafting of Rachel and Michelle in *Sink* and it is one that I hope to carry through in future films. The greys of humanity are the shades I enjoy playing in.

■ ***Why do you think that the international market struggles to process white Afrikaans narratives as African?***

I guess that globally, Africa and 'blackness' are muddled up in the same way that European and 'whiteness' are. People mistake geography for race and therein lies a large disconnect.

The story of *Fiela Se Kind* is a little complex because here you have brown and white characters all speaking a Dutch-hybrid language and it allows the views to accept that white Africans do exist.

■ ***What do you hope audiences will get from watching Fiela Se Kind?***

My hope is that you are moved, that this is an emotional experience and not an intellectual one. I don't expect everyone will like every choice made but, as you sit there watching the credits roll, I hope that you have some precipitation on your eyelids and can see the love and respect that went into this film.

Fiela se Kind opens at SA cinemas this Friday, 13 September 2019.

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ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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