

ROEPMAN

(The Callman)

A Piet De Jager Production
Directed by Paul Eilers

Written by Piet De Jager / Salmon De Jager / Jan Van Tonder

A film review by Franco P. Visser

It is very seldom that one comes across a South African film that speaks to you on so many levels, but here is such a film. Based on the book by Jan van Tonder with the same name, the film *Roepman* (The Call-man) is set in the South Africa of 1966, when the country was in the firm grip of the Afrikaans, mainly Dutch Reformed Church and the Verwoerd Apartheid-Government. The story of *Roepman* deals with an Afrikaans, white, railway community and the unique and often challenging issues of the then Afrikaans culture and psyche.

Joon (played by John-Henry Opperman) is the railway 'roepman', or call-man, as was the custom then of an individual being specifically appointed to 'call' those whose shifts in the railway were about to start. Joon went from house to house waking railway shift-workers in the early morning hours, and those that he 'called' in turn signed a calling register to show that they were woken up in time by Joon. But Joon's function and role in the storyline goes far further than just the official designated human alarm clock. He is also the unofficial protector of those in need of protecting, and the seer of the hidden and dark aspects of the railway community portrayed in the film. Joon's character takes on a magical appearance, and what happens to him in the film is really most unfortunate.

Joon's story, and the lives of the railway community, is portrayed through the eyes of Timus Rademan (played by Paul Loots) - an eleven-year old boy caught up in the structural mess that characterized the then government and church-bound community. To say that what is portrayed in the film happened in all apartheid-structured, white, Afrikaans-speaking communities, would be a misrepresentation of the then culture, but in many a male, church and apartheid government-headed households a lot of the happenings in the film did take place. However, up to now the film industry of South Africa has not portrayed the unspeakable and culturally bound events that scarred so many lives in the process, expect maybe the famed film maker Katinka Heyns of *Paljas* fame.

Timus is the youngest of four children, with a very strict and domineering father, Abraham (played by Deon Lotz). In the Rademan household everyone including Abraham's wife Ada (played by Rika Sennett) is subservient to Abraham, and whatever he says and decides for the family and its members is law. Sundays are spent going to church, and anyone stepping outside the Calvinistic Christian-National expectations and rules finds themselves in untold trouble and with untold heartache.



Timus, like Joon, sees all that happens in his community, and he becomes the unfortunate victim of the misguided local pervert, Hein (played by Andrew Thompson). Timus' innocence is lost, and like many young Afrikaner boys he is at a loss as to how to deal with his experiences. In addition he cannot make sense, as a silent observer, of the things he sees happening with his neighbours and other members of the community. Sex and sexuality were issues that were definitely not openly discussed or addressed. Everything was always kept quiet and secret, and one was only expected to conform and act in accordance with the then norms and values. If the church did not get hold of you and punished you for your wayward behaviour,

then the state would catch up with you, and the army would make you a man - a responsible, conservative, law abiding citizen who did not dare question the church or state authority. In addition other cultures or religions were not necessarily tolerated. Only one way existed, and that was Verwoerd's way.

The film also gives some insight, albeit slight, into the lives of the black people associated in some form or manner with the white Afrikaner communities. The Rademan's housekeeper Gladys (played by Kholeka Dakada) suffers greatly from the then government's laws, rules and regulations, and her role is brilliantly portrayed by Dakada. Many white Afrikaner households had their own Gladys, by way of speaking, with such housekeepers having a special meaning and place for many a youngster at the time.

Timus' grandmother, Ouma Makie (played by Lida Botha) is a character that is also worth mentioning. She is the naughty, humorous and enjoyable part of the Rademan family, and one gets the idea that she has her own longings for a life different from the one that was forced upon her. Timus' magical childhood is portrayed in stark contrast to his reality and the many events that characterized those tumultuous days. With Verwoerd's death the direction of the nation began to change, and change itself was inevitable. It is with films like *Roepman* that the unspoken becomes spoken, and that one begins to get an idea of what impact the apartheid government and the strict and controlling churches had on the young, white Afrikaner populace. The film *Roepman* will not be everyone's cup of tea, but it is a worthwhile film to view should you want to get a glimpse into how life was like for some young white Afrikaners. A lot happens in the film, and one is left with mixed feelings after viewing it. But bravo to Piet De Jager for this unique production!