

TSOTSI

A Moviworld 2005 release

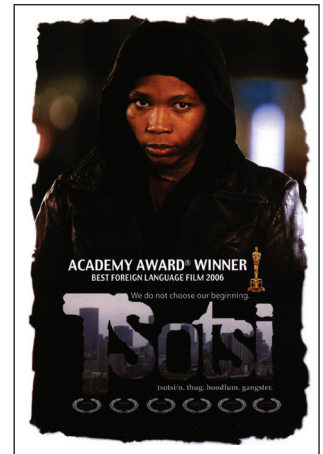
Produced by The UK Film and Television Production Company Plc.

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Screenplay and Direction by Gavin Hood

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser



The mere mention of the word 'highjack' elicits a variety of feelings, reactions and comments from people. The concept and its occurrence has become so familiar to South Africans that hardly a conversation goes by without someone having had some kind of experience with it, or with any kind of violent crime for that matter. With dread I decided to review the film "Tsotsi" for the *Journal* (SAPR). As a Mental Health Care Practitioner in State employment I certainly had my share of horrific crime stories to deal with. Yet another violent gangster film I thought. But I had to see what the fuss, and the 2005 Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and multiple other international awards was about. I was surprised, and dare I say moved.

Based on the 1961 novel 'Tsotsi' by playwright and author Athol Fugard (Random House Publishers Inc. New York), adapted and re-written for screen by Gavin Hood, the film highlights a township thug's struggle with life lived as a violent criminal and various childhood demons. Based in present-time Soweto, Tsotsi, born David (played by Presley Chweneyagae) and his three 'mates', the education student dropout Boston (played by Mothusi Magano), the violent, murderous Butcher (played by Zenzo Ngqobe) and Aap (played by Kenneth Nkosi), Tsotsi's 'not-so-bright' best friend, forms a gang with only one goal – money. No matter the person, the situation, the time, any opportunity to get money, and as much of it as possible, is used by the four.

It is during a drinking session in Soekie's (played by Thembi Nyandeni) shebeen (township pub) just after one of their successful 'jobs' that tempers start flaring between them. The confrontation between Tsotsi and Boston specifically, where Tsotsi is challenged by Boston on the concept of 'human decency', causes Tsotsi to face up to various issues stemming primarily from a childhood where he was orphaned after his mother died of AIDS and he fled from his alcoholic and abusive father. This confrontation leads Tsotsi to physically attack Boston, beating him senseless.

From this confrontation Tsotsi flees and end up in an upper class Johannesburg suburb. Here he highjacks a car, shooting the driver after she refused to relinquish her vehicle - the wife of a well to do and very influential and well-known societal figure. It is however not a 'regular' highjacking for Tsotsi as he is soon to discover. Upon abandoning the stolen car near Soweto, Tsotsi realises that there is a baby boy in the car, and this serves as the catalyst for a series of intriguing, moving and at times humorous

incidents. Tsotsi also starts questioning his own values and beliefs, as well as that of others. In the film Tsotsi has a very interesting run-in with a wheel chair bound beggar who inadvertently gives Tsotsi a different perspective on life.

The baby boy, kept by Tsotsi in a paper bag under his bed in his shanty town house brings him in touch with his own difficult childhood; a childhood spent begging, stealing and sleeping in stacked storm water pipes. As much as Tsotsi struggles to care for the baby boy and meet his needs for nurturance, one becomes aware that the presence of the baby boy in Tsotsi's life might actually be a very symbolic one. Here he is presented with an opportunity towards experiencing 'corrective nurturance'; by becoming attuned to the baby boy's needs and demands he in fact is starting to address his own needs that were so long repressed and neglected.

As Tsotsi realises that the baby boy needs proper care, he forces a shantytown mother named Miriam (played by Terry Pheto) to feed him. As the story unfolds she gets Tsotsi to leave the baby in her care for longer periods of time, and she also forces Tsotsi to rethink his beliefs and attitudes, especially those towards woman, relationships and his own life as a whole. Tsotsi disengages from his gang friends and what Tsotsi does with all of this at the end will not be divulged here.

Although western views on Psychology have been the dominant discourse over time, and frequent attempts have been made towards developing a more African, black psychological perspective, one cannot help but realise while viewing the film that no matter the theoretical perspective or psychological world view, certain ideas and concepts pertaining to humanity stretch across cultural boundaries. Issues highlighted in the film such as poverty, abuse, injustice and disrespect for human life do not need to be explained and understood from a particular psychological framework or epistemology. They are real issues in need of discussion and active prevention strategies and plans. Not only are these issues highlighted, but the film also causes one to rethink one's own values, beliefs and feelings regarding culture, discrimination and stereotypical attitudes.

The film version ends rather differently from Fugard's original novel, but due credit to Gavin Hood on taking the viewer on a journey unparalleled in the history of the South African film industry. 'Tsotsi' is a film that must be seen in order to appreciate its impact and true message – that hope remains eternal, no matter what.