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Women Screenwriters: South Africa

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Women Screenwriters: An International Guide, **Eds. Jule Selbo and Jill Nelmes.**

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SOUTH AFRICA

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GENERAL OVERVIEW

The involvement of women in the film industry in South Africa dates back to the apartheid-era when several white women worked within what was then, as now, a (white) male-dominated industry. In some instances, these women worked in professional partnerships with their husbands, such as producer/director Katinka Heyns who works with her scriptwriter husband, Chris Barnard. While women screenwriters remain outnumbered by their male counterparts in general, a number of white women – especially those who write in English – are relatively well-known, and still outnumber women of colour in the mainstream film industry, despite their minority status in terms of the country's population demographics. This remains a legacy of the colonial and apartheid-era privileging of the minority white population in South Africa. Emerging from this research undertaken to map the presence of women screenwriters in the South African film industry, are two significant findings: first, an awareness that while a few women of colour have begun to enter the filmmaking sector, they remain at the margins of the mainstream film industry, writing primarily for documentaries and short films and, secondly, the complete absence of black African women screenwriters. The reasons for this are unclear, and suggest that further research is warranted into the structural factors that continue to hamper the participation of women of colour – and black African women, in particular – in the film industry in South Africa, other than as actresses.

As in other parts of the world, television provides a more open environment for aspiring writers than does the world of feature film production. However, it is also an environment in which much of the scriptwriting and story development is generally done collaboratively, usually as part of a series writing team – and attendantly, with a certain level of anonymity or

only limited recognition. The profiles that follow indicate that even when women write for feature films, they often do so in collaboration, co-writing scripts with other writers, but also with directors and actors. This may reflect a particular gender-inflected preference in terms of modes of working, and may also provide easier access to feature film production for women screenwriters within the current film production landscape.

In the post-apartheid period, the establishment of the state-funded National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF), has brought with it opportunities for emergent screenwriters to develop their skills through several screenwriting training programmes. Although criticisms are regularly levelled against these screenwriting programmes for their emphasis on Hollywood narrative formulae and genres, a number of aspiring screenwriters, male and female, have utilised this opportunity to develop their feature film scripts. The SEDIBA screenwriting training programme is directed by two women screenwriters, Thandi Brewer and Julie Hall (profiled below). While most scripts are written in English, some of these training programmes include scripts written in Afrikaans (a South African language based primarily on Dutch, but also including vocabulary from Malay, Portuguese and several African languages), and a few in the more prominent African languages such as IsiZulu, TshiVenda or SeSotho. Much needs to be done to encourage both male and female writers to write in some of South Africa's other eleven official languages.

It is quite apparent from the profiles included here that most women screenwriters wear multiple hats as producers/directors/writers. One filmmaker noted that the South African film industry is small and dominated, as elsewhere, by male producers and directors who often work informally with a small group of male screenwriters. Women screenwriters often expend considerable time and effort working within the independent sector to see their scripts realised. As a result, they develop skills and expertise in several aspects of filmmaking, and quite frequently are forced to utilise all of these to see their scripts produced.

Many of the screenwriters profiled here are keen to tell stories that have not been told before about their own communities, or that draw on South Africa's rich, multicultural heritage, while also expressing a desire to tell their stories in a way that would cross the racial divides that still persist within the country. For this reason, this survey's identification of the dearth of black African women screenwriters indicates that the road ahead for women filmmakers, including screenwriters, is still a long one and that there are still many stories to be told by many different segments of South Africa's diverse population.

The short profiles that follow are listed in alphabetical order by surname, and is the first attempt to identify the women screenwriters in South Africa in any one review. As such, there are, no doubt, some names that have been inadvertently omitted, but it is hoped that the list will be expanded in the years to come.

INDIVIDUAL PROFILES

Sara Blecher is a graduate of New York University, and a co-founder of Cinga Productions. Although better known as a director and producer, Blecher also co-created and wrote many episodes in the television series, *Zero Tolerance*, which she directed and produced and which was nominated for an international Emmy award, as well as the award-winning 36-part drama, *Bay of Plenty*. Blecher works across several media platforms and formats, including short films, television series and documentaries. She co-wrote the screenplay for the feature film *Otelo Burning* (2011), which she also produced and directed. The film tells the story of a group of black teenage boys who discover the joys of surfing in the subtropical waters of the Indian Ocean holiday resort city of Durban, just a few miles away from their crime and poverty-ridden township of Lamontville. Set in the apartheid-era 1980s, the boys' dreams and joys in the hitherto unknown world of surfing is soon brutally

impacted by political, social and interpersonal conflict. Blecher also produced and directed the documentary, *Surfing Soweto* (2010), screened by CNN, which follows the lives of a group of Soweto teenagers who surf moving trains, using footage shot by her filmmaking team as well as by the boys themselves.

Lauren Beukes has worked as a scriptwriter for animated television series and is a comic-book writer, but shot to fame when her novel, Zoo City, won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke award. She is currently working on the screenplay for the novel's film adaptation, which Beukes describes as 'a dark and twisty love story murder mystery noir in a gritty magical Jo'burg' (van Wyk, 2011).

Thandi Brewer is an award winning playwright, screenwriter, producer, director, and script editor for the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF). Brewer graduated from Trinity College, London. She is the current Chair of the Writer's Guild of South Africa, and also heads up the Sediba Spark screenwriting training programme for the NFVF, together with Julie Hall. Her film writing credits include *Story of An African Farm* and several scripts for international films, including *Paris Le Cap*, *Cheap Lives*, *The Weatherman*, *12 Dancing Princesses*, *Corner Pocket* and *The Chemo Club*, and she has credits as a script editor/script doctor on a number of feature film productions, including *Otelo Burning*.

Julie Frederikse is a screenwriter, film producer and novelist, who wrote the screenplay for the feature film, *Izulu Lami/My Secret Sky* (2008), which tells the story of two recently orphaned children who leave their rural homestead on a quest and find themselves caught up in the desperate life of survival with a gang of street children. The film has won several international awards. Frederikse, a graduate of Cornell University, writes in English, Afrikaans and Zulu.

Margaret Goldsmid is a television producer, script editor and educator in screenwriting for the NFVF, where she also acts as script editor on feature films in development, and mentors aspiring screenwriters in the NFVF's screenwriting programme. Goldsmid has worked as a script editor for 15 years, and has written for, or produced a number of award-winning television drama series, including *Justice for All* and *7de Laan*. She has also taught short courses in screenwriting at AFDA and Monash University.

Julie Hall is a television scriptwriter, having worked on numerous television series in various genres and formats, including sitcoms, edutainment series, mini-series and dramas various. Her scriptwriting experience includes working on South Africa's most popular soapie, *Generations*, for five years. Hall co-heads the Sediba Spark screenwriting training programme for the NFVF with Thandi Brewer, and works as a script editor/doctor for various feature film projects. She is currently writing a romantic comedy feature film.

Acclaimed writer, **Rayda Jacobs**, turned her award-winning novel, Confessions of a Gambler, into a screenplay, directed it, and plays the lead role in *Confessions of a Gambler* (2007). Set amidst the conservative Cape Malay Muslim community in Cape Town, the film draws on Jacob's own experiences in its story of a pious Muslim woman who becomes a gambling addict. This controversial theme is, however, only one of a number of social challenges facing the community; the film includes a storyline in which a Muslim mother comes to terms with her son's homosexuality, and AIDS. Jacobs is also a documentary filmmaker who has produced, written and directed several documentaries about Islam and Muslim women.

Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren is a screenwriter and academic, teaching screenwriting at the University of the Witwatersrand's School of Arts (WSOA), while writing scripts for radio and television documentaries and series, including the children's television series *Thabang Thabong* and *Rivoningo.* Her screenplays for feature films include *Wolf Wolf,*

Hoe laat is dit? (2010), an innovative filmmaking project involving 20 directors, and *Babalas* (2012), which she co-wrote with Carl Stemmet. She is currently developing a feature film screenplay entitled *En Garde Rooinek* as part of the NFVF's Sediba Spark scriptwriting programme.

Shirley Johnston is an actress, screenwriter, playwright and educator, who has written for several South African television series, including *Isidingo, Backstage, Madam and Eve, Shooting Stars* and *Montana*. Her first efforts in several mediums/formats have won her awards: her first short film, *Clean Hands*, won an M-Net New Directions Screenwriting Award; her first play, *Plastics*, won the SACPAC Best Playwright award, and her debut feature film, *Felix!* (2013), won the 2004 Writer's Forum Award at Sithengi and was a quarter finalist in Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Screenwriting Competition. *Felix!* is an all-woman collaboration -- written, directed, shot and line-produced by women – but the story is about a teenage boy from the townships who dreams of becoming a jazz saxophonist.

Justine Loots is a screenwriter, independent filmmaker, educator, and script editor. Currently writing a mini-series for television, and co-writing an adaptation of the play Green Man Flashing for the big screen, she has worked on the writing teams of several television series, including *Erfsondes*, and actuality programmes such as *Carte Blanche* and *Carte Blanche Africa*. Loots headed up the script development programme at Videovision Entertainment for some time, and currently teaches screenwriting at the National Film and Video Foundation. Loots currently also works as a script editor for the NFVF.

Raeesa Mohamed is a radio and TV producer, presenter and news anchor, whose foray into screenwriting is very recent, with the release of the romantic comedy, *For Better For Worse* (2010). The film, which she wrote (and produced) to highlight the east coast city of Durban, explores the eccentricities of contemporary Indian South African life.

Jayan Moodley's debut film, *White Gold* (2010), is a historical drama inspired by her search for her ancestral roots. Moodley wrote and directed the film. Surprisingly, in a country which has the largest Indian-descent population outside India, *White Gold* is the first feature film that explores the experiences of Indian indentured workers on their arrival in South Africa in the late 1800s to work on the sugarcane plantations of the British colony now known as KwaZulu- Natal.

Beverly Mitchell is a producer/director/writer who works mainly in television. Mitchell co-wrote the screenplay (with Weaam Williams and Dingi Ntuli) for *34 South* – the first South African full-length feature film to be directed by a black South African woman, Maganthrie Pillay. *34 South* is a road movie about a group of young Capetonians on their way to Johannesburg. Mitchell also wrote and produced the documentary, *Footprints in Africa: Our Nation in Colour* (2008) for the SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation).

Born in Moçambique, **Helen Nogueira** is a writer, director and editor, who became the first woman to direct a feature film in South Africa with *Quest for Love* (1988), which she also wrote. *Quest for Love* focuses on the lives and conflicts of two lesbian women against the tensions of South Africa's political climate. Nogueira wrote and directed several short films, as well as the feature film, *The Good Fascist* (1992), and a documentary, *Ingrid Jonker: Her Lives and Time*, which explores the life of the iconic Afrikaner poet. Nogueira is writing a screenplay for a feature film on Jonker entitled *All That Breaks*.

Zulfah Otto Sallies is a screenwriter, filmmaker, writer, and playwright and poet whose films reflect the vibrancy of her upbringing in the Cape Malay Muslim community of the Bo-Kaap in Cape Town. In 2001, she wrote and directed the short film, *Raya* (2001),

broadcast as part of the Mama Africa series featuring films by African women. The film highlights the generational tensions amongst the residents of the Bo-Kaap whose Muslim identity is constantly tested against the seductions of sexual freedom, drug abuse, etc. She also co-wrote the screenplay for the short film, *Stompie and the Red Tide* (2000).

Elaine Proctor is a novelist, film director, screenwriter, actress and producer, who graduated with a Master's degree from the National Film and Television School in England. Her screenwriting credits include *On the Wire* (1990), *Friends* (1993), and *Kin* (2000), all of which she also directed. *On the Wire* (1990) was her graduation film and earned her the British Film Institute's Sutherland Trophy for most original and imaginative first film, while *Friends* won the Camera D'Or - Mention Speciale prize at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival. She released her debut novel, *Rhumba*, in 2012. Now resident in London, she continues to write novels and scripts set in southern Africa.

Hanneke Schutte is a young writer and director, whose screenplays for several short films have won awards both locally and overseas. Schutte shot to fame when she was selected as the South African winner of the Jameson First Shot competition with her screenplay for the short film, *Saving Norman*. The win provided Schutte the opportunity to fly to Los Angeles to direct Willem Dafoe in the leading role. *Saving Norman*, produced by actor Kevin Spacey, is the story of a hypochondriac ping pong player who never fully recovered from this defeat by default when he had to miss a major tournament. Schutte's first feature film, which she wrote and directed, *Jimmy in Pienk*, was released in 2013. The film is an Afrikaans-language social satire targeting Afrikaner conservatism about homosexuality. Her other screenwriting credits include the short film script, *The City Swallows*, which was a semi-finalist at the Berlin Today Awards; a screenplay provisionally titled '*A Chameleon called Gatiepie*, a film adaptation of Riana Scheepers' youth novel Blinde Sambok. She also wrote

the third instalment in the popular *Bakgat* film franchise, and acted as script editor on *Wolwedans in die Skemer* (2012), adapted from a long-running radio drama series.

Jann Turner co-wrote the screenplay for *White Wedding* (2009), which was also her directorial feature film debut. The romantic comedy/road trip was very successful in South Africa, and was nominated in seven categories at the South African Film and TV Awards (SAFTA). It was South Africa's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 82nd Oscar Awards. Turner's collaboration with two-well-known South African actors, Rapulana Seiphemo and Kenneth Nkosi, also inspired their next film, *Paradise Stop* (2011),for which Turner once again co-wrote the screenplay. *Paradise Stop* is a high-speed action comedy/ heist film which she produced and directed. Turner is a graduate of NYU's film school, and has also written for a number of television series, in addition to several novels, including Home Is Where You Find It, Heartland and Southern Cross. She also co-created several television drama series such as *Hard Copy*, a drama series set in the newsroom of an independent, influential weekly newspaper, which went on to win the Best TV Drama category of the South African Film & TV Awards.

Janet van Eeden started her screenwriting career in the United Kingdom, writing plays and teaching drama, before returning to South Africa. van Eeden has written a number of screenplays, including *A Matter of Time, No Going Back,* and *Skeleton Coast*, and the short film, *The Red Shoes.* Although several of her scripts were optioned, none was produced, until she responded to a call to develop a full feature film script about a white lion. Drawing on traditional African beliefs about the ancestral links to white lions, van Eeden's screenplay focuses on actual, not romanticised, lion behaviour and reflects a strong conservational approach in its story about a white lion cub that is rejected by its pride, and the Shangaan tribesman who takes on the guardianship of the cub in accordance with the beliefs of his people. The film, *White Lion* (2010), won the Audience Award at the Lucas International Festival of Films for Children and Young People. van Eeden also acted as script editor for the documentary, *Property of the State* (2003) which explores the status and experiences of gay men in the apartheid-era military in South Africa.

Sandra Vaughn is an actress and comic who wrote the screenplay for the Afrikaans-language romantic comedy, *Semi-Soet* (2012), much of which is set on a wine estate, hence the title (semi-sweet). Her other writing credits include the TV series *Getroud met Rugby* (2009) and *Liefste Kayla* (2013). *Getroud met Rugby*, which translates into English as *Married To Rugby*, is an Afrikaans-language television series similar to the British television series, *Footballers' Wives*. *Liefste Kayla* focuses on the life of a 13-year old girl who writes and sings her own songs.

Weaam Williams and Beverley Mitchell co-wrote the screenplay (with Dingi Ntuli) for *34 South* – the first South African full-length feature film to be directed by a black South African woman, Maganthrie Pillay—a road movie about a group of young Capetonians on

their way to Johannesburg. Weeam Williams, who is a published poet and short story writer, has also directed two documentaries, *The Feminine Divine* which profiles three women healers, and *Hip Hop Revolution* (2006) which explores the 25 year journey of hip hop in South Africa and which approaches hip hop as a source of inspiration and activism.

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