

# KINO LORBER



# THE WOUND

A FILM BY JOHN TRENGOVE

2017 | South Africa  
English and Zhosha with English subtitles | 88 minutes | DCP

Press materials  
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## Synopsis

Brimming with sex and violence, *The Wound* is an exploration of tradition and sexuality set amid South Africa's Xhosa culture. Every year, the tribe's young men are brought to the mountains of the Eastern Cape to participate in an ancient coming-of-age ritual. Xolani, a quiet and sensitive factory worker (played by openly gay musician Nakhane Touré), is assigned to guide Kwanda, a city boy from Johannesburg sent by his father to be toughened up, through this rite of passage into manhood.

As Kwanda defiantly negotiates his queer identity within this masculine environment, he quickly recognizes the nature of Xolani's relationship with fellow guide Vija. The three men commence a dangerous dance with each other and their own desires and, soon, the threat of exposure elevates the tension to breaking point. *The Wound* had its world premiere at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival, was the opening night selection of Berlinale Panorama, and won Outstanding First Feature at Frameline in San Francisco.

## Director's Note

*The Wound* was born out of a desire to push back against clichéd stereotypes of black masculinity perpetuated inside and outside of African cinema. As a white man, representing marginalized black realities that are not my own, the situation is of course complicated. Even highly problematic.

It was important to me that the story mirrors this problem. The character of Kwanda is an outsider to the traditional world who expresses more or less my own ideas about human rights and individual freedom. He's also the problem. His preconceptions create jeopardy and crisis for others who have much more to lose than him. This was my way of saying: "I don't have the answers and my own values don't necessarily apply here".

A film such as this cannot hope to provide solutions for the crisis faced by millions of queer people in the African continent and around the world, only to present the crisis for what it is – a deep and ever widening chasm. In writing *The Wound*, inspiration came, unexpectedly, from Robert Mugabe. Statements that he and other African leaders have made since the early 90s imply that homosexuality is a symptom of western decadence that threatens "traditional" culture. And so we thought ok: let's use that idea. Let's imagine "gayness" as some kind of virus that penetrates and threatens a patriarchal organism, and let's see how that organism responds to being penetrated.

- John Trengove

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## What is Ukwaluka?

Ukwaluka is a traditional initiation into manhood that is widely practiced by the Xhosa people of South Africa.

Twice a year, groups of initiates in their late adolescence leave their communities to live in secluded camps where they are ritually circumcised. For several weeks, initiates are nursed and mentored by young men from their communities (khankathas) after which they return home to assume the privileges and responsibilities of adult men. Increasingly, the practice faces mounting criticism for reasons of safety and relevance, although it remains a cornerstone of traditional Xhosa culture and is considered the defining event of a man's life.

While Xhosa men are forbidden to speak openly of their experience of Ukwalukha, Nelson Mandela famously broke the secrecy taboo by describing his initiation in his autobiography, *Long Walk To Freedom*. The ritual is also the subject of *The Wound* co-writer Thando Mggolozana's debut novel, *A Man Who Is Not A Man*.

## Interview with director John Trengove

### **What drew you to the subject matter?**

I was interested in what happens when groups of men come together and organize themselves outside of society and the codes of their everyday lives. I wanted to show the intense emotional and physical exchanges that are possible in these spaces and how repressing strong feelings leads to a kind of toxicity and violence. As an outsider to this culture, it was important that I approach this story from the perspective of characters who are themselves outsiders, who struggle to conform to the status quo that they are a part of.

### **What was the process of writing *The Wound*?**

We started with a lot of research. Spent time in the Eastern Cape which is where the ritual is mostly practiced. We listened to many testimonials and conversations with Xhosa men who had been through the ritual. Gay men, straight men, some urbanized and affluent, others from remote rural areas. These stories sparked our earliest ideas about the narrative. Researching the ritual brought up conflicting feelings in me. You hear stories about how it can be a breeding ground for homophobic and hyper-masculine behavior. At the same time, I got to see firsthand the transformative effect it had on some men who went through it. In a world that is under-fathered, there is something profound about a ritual that shows a young boy his place in the world of men.

### **How do you navigate the politics of being a white filmmaker depicting marginal characters with realities different than your own?**

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As much as possible I tried to disrupt my own preconceptions. Like most middle-class audiences who watch the film, it would be easy for me to look at Xolani and say, here is a gay character who is repressed and deserves to be emancipated from his oppressive community and express himself as an individual. I resisted those kinds of resolutions for his character and tried instead to present his problem for what it is, which is big and difficult, without clear answers. The character of Kwanda comes closest to expressing those values, but he's also the problem. His preconceptions create jeopardy and crisis for others who have much more to lose than him. This was my way of saying, "I don't have the answers and my own values don't necessarily apply here."

## **Given the controversy of the ritual in South Africa, how do you think it will be received?**

Ukwaluka is a taboo ritual and representing it in the way we have is contentious. We knew from the start that we'd spark strong reactions from traditionalists. But there was also a lot of encouragement from a younger Xhosa generation who seems eager to break the silence around the initiation which is seen to perpetuate some of the dangers associated with it. It's a vast and very nuanced practice and there remains a lot to be said about the ritual that is not my place to talk about. Things that need to be said from within the culture. Hopefully *The Wound* could spark some of that. Maybe a gay Xhosa kid will look at it one day and go, actually, that wasn't my experience at all, and be inspired to write his own story.

## **How did you come to work with Thando Mgqolozana?**

I approached Thando when I read his first novel *A Man Who Is Not A Man*, which deals with the initiation. Meeting him was a turning point because he clearly got what I was trying to do. I don't think he was necessarily interested in working on a project about the initiation again, but he responded strongly to the idea of depicting alternative African masculinities. Thando wrote his own version of the treatment, filtering my ideas through his own experiences and opening up narrative possibilities within the frame of the ritual. We also collaborated on a short film, *The Goat*, based on a chapter from his novel.

## **Can you describe your process on set?**

We had a few rules that were there to help us stay connected to the truth. All the roles including speaking extras had to be first language Xhosa men who had their own first-hand experience of the ritual. The only exception to this was Niza Jay Ncoyini who plays Kwanda, which made sense because his character challenges and defies the ritual. The larger community of Xhosa men and elders in the film are all non-actors. We asked them to perform the different aspects of the ritual as they would do it, and to react to the rehearsed scenarios in any way they felt was right. If they didn't approve of a character's behavior, they would say so during

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takes. Sometimes we wouldn't call cut and scenes would just carry on and we'd be rolling as these men were offering up the most incredible material, completely unscripted.

Bongile Mantsai, who played Vija, is a very experienced theatre actor, was particularly good at encouraging this free flow interaction with the group. It was very exciting to watch and it really kept us on our toes. We shot the group scenes chronologically, in the order that they would happen in the ritual.

## **On working with Nakhane Touré.**

I met Nakhane about 2 years ago and I was instantly a fan. I secretly started writing the lead character for him after our first meeting. Even though he didn't have any professional acting experience I had a feeling that he would be hypnotic on camera. Nakhane is a fearless and multifaceted artist in his own right and understands intrinsically that you have to put yourself outside your comfort zone to do interesting work. He does this instinctively without blocking or resisting and allows himself to be very vulnerable and honest in front of the camera. It's very rare to work with an actor like that.

## **Can you speak about your collaboration with Urucu Media?**

Until recently there was a shortage of South African film producers willing to take risks on non-formulaic projects. When I joined forces with Elias Ribeiro at Urucu Media, the first thing we decided was that this is exactly the niche the company would occupy. We wanted to create a space for films like ***The Wound***, to encourage original voices in local cinema that could hopefully also reach an international audience. People thought we were crazy when we started developing this film, but Elias's incredible optimism and ability to embrace less conventional ways of financing, particularly international co-production, meant that it finally got made. Today we are seeing more daring films coming out of South Africa, and I like to think Urucu has been a significant part of that shift.

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## CAST

Xolani - Nakhane Touré  
Vija - Bongile Mantsai  
Kwanda - Niza Jay Ncoyini  
Bablo – Thobani Mseleni

### *Initiates*

Gamelihle Bovana  
Halalisani Bradley Cebekhulu  
Inga Qwede  
Sibabalwe Ngqayana  
Siphosethu Ngcetane

## CREW

Director – John Trengove  
Writers – John Trengove , Thando Mggqolozana, Malusi Bengu  
Director of Photography – Paul Ozgur  
Production Designers – Bobby Cardoso, Solly Sithole  
Costume Designer – Lehasa Molloyi  
Makeup Artists – Smartie Olifant , Mthokozisi Nhlapo  
Casting Director – Cait Pansegrouw  
Editor – Matthew Swanepoel  
Sound Designer – Matthew James  
Composer – João Orecchia  
Producers – Elias Ribeiro & Cait Pansegrouw / urucu media

### *Co-Producers*

Michael Eckelt / Riva Filmproduktion  
Claudia Tronnier / Das Kleine Fernsehspiel  
Olaf Grunert / ARTE/ZDF  
Trent / Oak Motion Pictures  
Batana Vundla / Cool Take Pictures  
Marie Dubas / Deuxième Ligne Films  
Eric Lagesse / Sampek productions  
Bjorn Koll / Edition Salzgeber  
Bianca Isaac / Figjam Entertainment

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LINK:

<https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/nakhane-toure-books-writing-saved-life/>

## Nakhane Touré On How Books And Writing Saved His Life

By Mbali Phala

Last updated Apr 5, 2016

**Born Nakhane Mavuso and later changed to Mhlakahlaka, the author and singer took on the Touré signature as a way of dedication to his champion, Ali Farka Touré, the Malian singer and multi-instrumentalist. Touré shared with Mbali Zwane how seeing characters like him in books saved his life.**

I remember being a young queer boy, coming to terms with the fact that I felt like an outsider all my life and picking out James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*. That book saved my life because here was someone who felt like me. It made me accept that my feelings were not crazy.

Growing up I was the only child for about eight years and I was raised by a lot of different people. I was raised by my mother then my aunt and cousin, I was always shifted around to different places. I had to grapple with my surroundings and I really liked my own space. During this time, my imagination was the only thing keeping me sane. I read a lot. In primary school, my friends and I used to get the same books and challenge each other on who would finish reading the book first. In grade 11, we had to submit essays. The teacher said she wanted to see me after class and I remember thinking "Oh goodness, what have I done?" She said, "I read your essay, it's good but it's not an essay, it's a short story. Do you want to write a book? Write a book and I'll read it." She gave me some validation that I could do it and be good at it. She attributed to my existence in the world.

Reading has made me not kill myself. It's important for any reader to be able to connect with a book, even if the writer is from a different generation and on the other side of the world. Reading books that had characters like myself helped me deal with a ton of things. Like Toni Morrison said, if you're not reading what you want to read, you're in a good position to write it yourself. That's how my book *Piggy Boy's Blues* came about.

I started writing to exorcise my demons. Any writer that says they were initially writing for people is not telling the truth, because on some level, any sort of creative work is selfish and

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you're doing it to please yourself first. Before even thinking about publishing, I just wanted to get something out of me. I wanted to cleanse myself by writing it out. When I initially started writing the book, it was a memoir but then I thought "Ahh, I don't read memoirs so maybe this won't work". I also wanted to work my imagination while writing a story that was so influenced by my surroundings but I wanted to look at it from an outsider's point of view, with a wide-angled camera of these characters.

Writing has allowed me to just sit down and listen to people. One of the things I loved about my editor was that if I wanted to make a decision about the book, she'd say, "What do you think the character wants?" and I'd be like, "Fuck, just tell me and stop [Miyagi-ing](#) me". That was one of the biggest gifts from the book. I had to sit down and listen to the characters and their needs. Going to festivals and panel discussions has also enabled me to learn things from my fellow writers in conversations. It excites me to just sit down and listen and learn, I'm like a baby here still fumbling about. Writing has assured me that I'm not alone and a freak, it's a testament.

Writing the book was really difficult but enjoyable at the same time. The book was an on-and-off process of seven years. It changed significantly towards completion. I didn't want the book to be unreachable so I worked on it a bit more. The most difficult thing in writing the book was finding my own voice. I have lots and lots of heroes, how do I use my influences from those heroes but mixing it them up in order for it to be me? To write like myself has been difficult and the only thing that'll help fine-tune my voice is to keep writing.

The challenging thing after my book got published is the separation between the book and Nakhane. In the beginning, I felt like I had to hammer the fact that it is not an autobiography or a memoir. But someone advised me that you can never write yourself out of your work because it's your work so I decided to let it be. On some level, of course, I'm using myself and experiences in the book because I can access those feelings to feel like the character. The book is not biographical but it is intimate. I'm not bothered by it anymore, if it helps the reader connect to the book, that's okay. I've done the work and how you chose to enjoy it is up to you. People telling you what to do and policing creativity murders the creative process all the time. Before you even write a page, you're thinking of business and whether or not this will be shelved and sold. It clogs your creativity.

It took a long time to finish writing the book and at 28, I'm happy it is what it is now. The book will always be a snapshot of who Nakhane the writer was. Even if I wake up three years from now and question it.