

Last Grave at Dimbaza

A review by Paul T. Miller

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Last Grave at Dimaza, 1974, digitally remastered 2005

Directors: Chris Curling and Pascoe MacFarlane

Producers: Nana Mahomo, Antonia Caccia and Andrew Tsehiana

Duration: 55 minutes – Available on DVD or VHS

Distributor: First Run Icarus Films, www.frif.com

\$390.00 – Sale, \$100.00 – Rental

Last Grave at Dimbaza, the recently re-mastered 1973 documentary produced by South African exile Nana Mahomo, was filmed clandestinely and smuggled out of the country because of its unflinching and critical assessment of apartheid. The film contrasts the lives of Black and white South Africans, focusing on inequities in housing, education, wages and health care. Using vivid imagery shot in cities, townships and Bantustans (also called “homelands”) from around the country, Mahomo’s intention is, “to show what it is like for the black people of South Africa to be on the receiving end of the white government’s apartheid policy.”

Although the first few scenes are repetitive with respect to information on employment and living conditions, the images are compelling, contrasting the squalor Blacks are forced to live in with the relatively luxurious conditions surrounding most whites. In stark language and images, the viewer is able to see first hand how husbands are forced to live in single sex labor camps away from their wives and families, how families are forced to live on “homelands” where arable land is sparse and employment is non-existent and how the system of forced labor is nothing short of modern-day enslavement. In what is perhaps the most cavalier statement of many made by South African officials, the film relays the Department of Justice minister’s opinion that “Black workers must not be burdened with superfluous appendages like women and children,” thereby justifying the compulsory separation of men from their women and children.

Last Grave plunges right in, describing the concrete conditions that impact on the daily lives of Black South Africans. Though it sacrifices some historical context, like noting the country's relationship with Britain, who transferred power to the white supremacist government in 1910, or explaining that the drive to separate Blacks and whites stemmed from the 1913 Natives Land Act which divided the country into African and European areas, the film does make clear the inequality that exists everywhere in the country. For example, on more than one occasion viewers can see how and where 87% of the land in South Africa is reserved for the white population of 4 million while the remaining 13% is allocated to the Black and Colored population of 19 million.

The film notes that while he was Minister for Bantu Administration and Development, recently deceased president P. W. Botha (1916-2006) once claimed, "The Bantu people like being moved. The Bantu people like the places they are being resettled." This official resettlement policy of the apartheid government was enforced by the 1957 Group Areas Act that created separate residential areas in cities and towns according to race. In the 1970s alone, the time during which the film was made, some 3.5 million Blacks were forcibly relocated to townships or Bantustans (also known as "homelands") because they lived in too close of proximity to whites. *Last Grave* allows the viewer to see the effect of the Group Areas Act and shows how all-Black townships like Soweto, with a population of nearly 1 million, function solely to provide a cheap source of labor for major cities like Johannesburg. This fact is clear when the film relates the Minister of Bantu Affairs' assertion that "African males from the homelands have no rights whatsoever in South Africa. They are only in South Africa to sell their labor."

Last Grave is perhaps most persuasive is its graphic illustration of the disparities between Black and white South Africans in terms of employment. For example, it states that 7 of 10 Black families in Johannesburg, many working, live below the poverty line and that 20% of working adults go hungry. In fact, in a section of the film focusing on Port Elizabeth's auto and rubber industries, it is noted that 80% of the private industrial production in South Africa is due to foreign firms, most of which pay their workers below the poverty line.

In a particularly dramatic sequence, the film describes the working conditions of servants in a white household. One woman, a nanny, is charged with feeding her white employer's child even though her own son died of malnutrition and her newborn twins will be sent off to relatives 300 miles away to be cared for because they are not allowed to live with the mother in the servant's quarters on her employer's property.

Surprisingly, there is no mention of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, a psychological turning point in the fight against apartheid. Here, police fired into a crowd of people demonstrating against the pass laws killing 67, some of who were women and children shot in the back while trying to escape. However, *Last Grave* does well to account for the Pass Laws, a particularly pernicious form of surveillance and control instituted first in 1945 and amended in 1952. The film notes that the Pass Laws required all Blacks over the age of 16 to carry pass books stating where they were permitted to live and what work they were permitted to do. According to author Vincent Khapoya, “The police had wide discretionary power to stop any black person and ask for his or her reference book. If one couldn’t be produced, had stamps missing, or contained inaccurate information, the individual could be hauled off to jail.” Khapoya notes that an average of 500,000 Black South Africans were arrested each year for Pass Law violations and the film indicates that in one ten year period six million people, over half the adult population, were arrested for violations.

Last Grave ends on a somber note in the township of Dimbaza. The concluding sequences show the graves of African children, some marked with plastic feeding bottles, and a long row of empty graves, a foreboding for the future. The film ends reminding the viewer that in the hour it took to watch it, six families had been kicked out of their homes, 60 people were arrested for Pass Law violations and 60 children have died of malnutrition.

In this time of ultra-fast-paced information technology and short historical memory, *Last Grave at Dimbaza* serves as a necessary reminder of human cruelty and suffering. Its stark visual account and narrative form serve as good teaching tools, illustrating the lessons of the past so that people might apply them to the future.

References

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