



SURVIVAL IS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

GOD'S WORK

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MICHAEL JAMES



**Logline**

In a crumbling safe house in Durban, a group of homeless men navigate violence, addiction, and fragile brotherhood until the arrival of a film crew fractures reality itself, exposing the uneasy power dynamics between those who are seen and those who do the seeing.

Title:

God's Work

Genre:

Social Drama/
Psychological Drama

Country of origin

South Africa

Language(s):

Zulu and English
w/ English Subtitles

Running Time:

126 min

Writer / Director:

Michael James

Composer:

George Acogny

Producer:

Sithabile Mkhize

Co-Producer:

Marco Orsini

Executive Producers:

Gary Springer and Toni Monty

Production Company:

Maverick Resistance Productions

Cinematographer:

Jared Hinde

Post Production Supervisor:

Lacey Tu

Edited by:

Dionysis Xenos



SYNOPSIS

In the heart of Durban, a crumbling, graffiti-covered building shelters a group of homeless men living on the edge of survival. Within its walls, they share food, stories, humour, and fleeting moments of dignity, forming a fragile brotherhood against the constant pressures of hunger, violence, and systemic neglect.

Their world, however, is never sealed off. Police brutality, political performance, and public indifference intrude with quiet regularity. When a film crew arrives to document their lives, the promise of being “seen” introduces a new and unsettling dynamic: visibility becomes transactional, and the camera itself becomes an active force within their reality.

As the filmmaking process unfolds, cracks begin to show. The presence of the director, initially unseen, gradually emerges, shifting the film away from observation and into confrontation. The boundaries between subject and author collapse. Trust erodes. The act of representation itself is called into question.

At the centre of this unravelling is a man haunted by memory, addiction, and visions that blur the line between dream and waking life. As his psychological state deteriorates, the film fractures formally, moving between realism, hallucination, and meta-cinematic rupture, mirroring the instability of both his inner world and the film’s own gaze.

God’s Work becomes less a story about the margins than a reflection on the distance between those who live within them and those who attempt to capture them. In exposing that distance, the film resists easy empathy and instead confronts the audience with a deeper, more uncomfortable question: what does it mean to truly see another human being?

PRODUCTION NOTES

The global reality of poverty and homelessness is both visible and persistently misunderstood. For writer and director Michael James, the challenge of engaging with this reality was not simply how to portray it but whether it could be portrayed at all without distortion.

God's Work began during the COVID-19 lockdown as an attempt to document the lives of homeless men living in temporary shelters in Durban, South Africa. What emerged instead was a confrontation with the limits of that attempt. The camera did not grant access, it revealed distance. The more the filmmaker observed, the more apparent it became that he was not capturing an objective reality, but constructing a version of it shaped by his own perspective. This realization became the foundation of the film.

“As a middle-class white filmmaker working within a predominantly Black space shaped by historical inequality,” James reflects, “my presence was not neutral. It carried assumptions, expectations, and a history of representation that could not be ignored.” Rather than attempt to resolve this tension, God's Work places it at the centre of its narrative.

The project evolved from documentary into fiction not as a departure from truth, but as a way of engaging with it more honestly. Through workshops with participants during lockdown, James observed how the men often fictionalised their own experiences, transforming lived reality into stories that carried emotional and psychological truth beyond factual accuracy.



This insight reshaped the film's approach. Instead of attempting to "capture" reality, *God's Work* constructs a layered narrative in which realism, memory, hallucination, and performance coexist. The film becomes less an act of observation and more an interrogation of the structures through which observation takes place.

Within the film, a documentary crew arrives to record the lives of the men. What begins as an act of visibility quickly becomes unstable. The presence of the camera alters behaviour, introduces expectation, and exposes underlying tensions. When the filmmaker himself enters the frame, the illusion of objectivity collapses entirely. This is not a stylistic device but a deliberate rupture.

"The decision to include me in the film", says James, "was not about authorship, but about honesty. I was already present, shaping the narrative from behind the camera. To pretend otherwise would have been the greater fiction."

As the film progresses, the relationship between filmmaker and subject deteriorates. Trust erodes. The act of representation itself is called into question. In this breakdown, the film reveals the inherent power imbalance embedded in the act of filming, particularly within a context marked by race, inequality, and historical exploitation.

The film's formal structure reflects this instability. Drawing inspiration from works such as *La Haine* by Mathieu Kassovitz and *Encounters at the End of the World* by Werner Herzog, *God's Work* moves fluidly between modes of storytelling. Naturalistic, observational scenes give way to hallucinatory sequences that reflect the interior life of its central character, Simphiwe, a man navigating trauma, addiction, and memory. In these moments, time becomes non-linear, and the boundaries between past, present, and imagined futures dissolve.

A third visual layer, documentary-style footage, mimics *cinéma vérité* techniques but ultimately exposes their inadequacy. The handheld camera, zooms, and raw framing suggest immediacy yet fail to penetrate the deeper realities of the characters' lives.



A fourth layer, what James refers to as the “archival world”, invokes cinema’s own history, most notably through the inclusion of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* by the Lumière Brothers. The recurring motif of the train, both visual and sonic, becomes a symbolic thread connecting memory, perception, and the origins of cinematic illusion.

Across these shifting forms, the film resists coherence in the traditional sense. Instead, it constructs a fractured cinematic language that mirrors both the instability of its protagonist’s inner world and the instability of the film’s own gaze.

Central to *God’s Work* is the tension between waking and dreaming. The concept of “resignation syndrome”, a real condition observed among marginalised populations, serves as a metaphorical framework for the film. In this state, individuals withdraw from reality, entering a comatose existence when the future becomes unimaginable.

Within the film, this condition is reimagined as both a physical and psychological phenomenon. The characters fear sleep not only because it may lead to death, but because it represents surrender. And yet, paradoxically, dreaming becomes their only means of survival. “We tell ourselves stories every day just to keep going,” James notes. “For these characters, storytelling, through memory, hallucination, or imagination, is a way of resisting disappearance.”

Simphiwe’s journey unfolds within this tension. His visions, of lost family, past trauma, and imagined futures are not escapist, but essential. They form a fragmented internal narrative that sustains him in the absence of external stability.

As the narrative progresses, the film turns increasingly inward. The documentary framework disintegrates. The filmmaker’s authority is undermined. The subjects resist being defined.

In one pivotal moment, the presence of a government official within the space triggers a rupture between the film crew and the men, foregrounding the political and social tensions that underpin their interaction. The film no longer attempts to mediate these tensions, it exposes them. This collapse is intentional.



Rather than offering resolution, *God's Work* dismantles its own structure, culminating in a final gesture that reveals the artifice of the film itself. In a direct reference to *Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami, the illusion is broken, and the audience is returned to the reality of filmmaking.

“For all the questions the film raises,” James explains, “there are no easy answers. By revealing the film as a construction, I wanted to create space for reflection rather than closure.”

God's Work does not seek to provide a definitive account of life on the margins. Nor does it attempt to speak on behalf of its characters. Instead, it positions itself as a critical reflection on the act of representation itself. The film resists easy empathy. It disrupts the viewer's sense of narrative stability. It challenges the assumption that seeing is equivalent to understanding. In doing so, it shifts the focus away from its subjects and toward the audience.

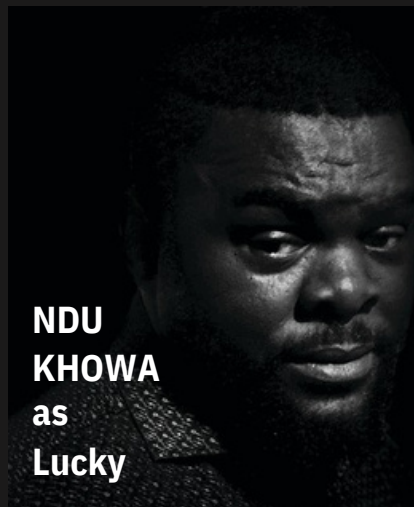
What does it mean to observe another person's life?
What assumptions shape that observation?
And what responsibility accompanies the act of looking?

In confronting these questions, *God's Work* becomes not only a story about those on the margins, but a meditation on the distance between lives, and the limits of cinema in bridging that distance.

From its origins in documentary experimentation to its final form as a hybrid narrative, *God's Work* is driven by a singular tension: the desire to understand, and the recognition that such understanding may always be incomplete. Rather than resolve this contradiction, the film holds it in place. In that space, between truth and construction, empathy and distance, subject and observer, *God's Work* finds its voice.



KEY CAST



MICHAEL JAMES

WRITER AND DIRECTOR

Michael James is a Durban-based filmmaker, writer, and academic whose work interrogates how cinema constructs meaning, particularly in contexts shaped by history, identity, and power. His practice is grounded in an ongoing exploration of image-making and the limits of representation.

Alongside a career in teaching film, philosophy, and political science and his current research into the genealogy of cinematic image-making through the Master of Fine Arts programme at the University of the Witwatersrand, James has written award-winning plays and screenplays, directed for television, and produced a body of work spanning fiction and documentary. His debut feature, *Dreams of Gomorrah*, won three 2020 Simon Sabela Awards and two African Emerging Filmmaker Awards and is currently distributed across the continent by MultiChoice. His documentary *Free Education: The Story of Bonginkosi Khanyile* premiered at the Encounters Documentary Film Festival and received multiple international awards.

Across his work, James returns to a central question: how images shape our understanding of reality, and what is at stake in the act of representing others. Influenced by filmmakers such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Abbas Kiarostami, Werner Herzog, and RaMell Ross, his films test the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, often turning the camera back on itself.



GEORGE ACOGNY

COMPOSER



Composer | Arranger | Music Producer | Musician | Film Producer

Born in West Africa, George Acogny has lived in New York, Vienna, Paris, England and several African countries. A multi-instrumentalist, his primary instrument is the guitar. A strong melodic sensibility distinguishes his compositions. His career was shaped by collaborations with renowned guitarist Larry Coryell, his friendship with David Gilmour, and Peter Gabriel, whom he created sounds and music with, and introduced to Africa.

In the 1970s, George signed with Warner Bros. Records under the Strings indie label and toured extensively across France and Europe. By the 1980s, he was producing and arranging successful pop records, and in the 1990s, he relocated to the U.S., transitioning into film music.

As a music supervisor, songwriter, and producer, he has contributed to numerous films and TV series. He served as an executive producer on *Come Away* (starring Angelina Jolie, David Oyelowo, Michael Caine and Gugu Mbatha-Raw) and *Race* (with Stephan James, Jason Sudeikis, Jeremy Irons and William Hurt). His compositions feature in independent films such as *Latin 4Plus* and *Beyond the Raging Seas*, as well as Chinese productions and Nigerian films like *Funmilayo* and *House of Ga'a*.

With decades of experience, George continues to bring his diverse musical expertise to international cinema and music production.

SITHABILE MKHIZE

PRODUCER

A creative screenwriter and producer dedicated to telling stories that make the world a more empathetic place. Sithabile Mkhize is committed to telling stories that amplify marginalized voices and reframe Africa's narrative. Based in Durban, she has spent the past five years developing and producing compelling films. Her debut feature, *Dreams of Gomorrah*, was acquired by MultiChoice/M-Net after earning multiple award nominations. She has also produced two documentaries for E-TV. A Durban FilmMart alumna, she has participated in international industry programs, including Berlinale, Cannes, and the Trajectory Training Program. With expertise in storytelling and co-production, she continues to shape thought-provoking cinema that resonates globally.



MARCO ORSINI

CO-PRODUCER



Marco Orsini is a writer, director, producer, and mentor who views audio-visual storytelling as a powerful tool to educate, advocate, and inspire. He co-founded the International Emerging Talent Film Association (IEFTA), a Monaco-based NGO established in 2006, dedicated to discovering and nurturing filmmakers from emerging regions worldwide. Through his production company, MoJo Entertainment, Marco has financed select arthouse films, including *God's Work* by Michael James.

Marco began his career in U.S. television, producing over 60 hours of primetime programming before transitioning to filmmaking. His award-winning documentaries, such as *Gray Matters* and *Beyond the Raging Sea*, have been showcased at major festivals, aired on TV and VOD platforms, and translated into multiple languages. His work has earned recognition from leading industry publications, including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The Guardian*, and *Variety*.

In addition to filmmaking, Marco has produced visual content and media campaigns for the UNHCR and established a film fund in Greece to support IEFTA's mission of awarding cash prizes at film labs and festivals worldwide. He is an active public speaker, producer, and conference host at festivals globally, focusing on providing emerging filmmakers with the training, development, and access they need to succeed in audiovisual storytelling.

Marco's commitment to raising awareness through film and dialogue is evident in his participation in masterclasses, such as the Film Resilience session at Durban Filmmart in 2024, and his inclusion in the Arab Cinema Centre's 'Golden 101' list of notable contributors to filmmaking in the Arab world. His recent documentary, *Latin Four Plus*, won the Audience Choice Award at the Orlando Film Festival and was awarded Best Documentary at the International Puerto Rican Heritage Film Festival in 2023.

GARY SPRINGER

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



Gary Springer is an entertainment publicist representing film, theatre and events. His company represents independent and foreign films at festivals in the US and abroad, and for release in NY and nationally as well as serving as sales, distribution and awards consultant. He has represented or consulted on multiple film festivals in the US and internationally. Gary has represented over 25 Broadway shows, and numerous off-Broadway productions and companies. Gary's first career was as an actor with film appearances including "Dog Day Afternoon", "Jaws 2", "Small Circle of Friends" and "Law and Disorder". Gary is the international press consultant to the Monaco based International Emerging Film Talent Association. He is a voting member for the Academy Awards.

TONI MONTY

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER



Toni Monty is an executive producer and managing director of A.M. Afrika Film Consultants, with over two decades of experience shaping African cinema and nurturing emerging filmmakers. Based in Durban, she has played a pivotal role in developing creative talent and guiding projects from early development to international markets.

Through her leadership at the Durban Film Office and as founder of the Durban FilmMart, Toni has mentored and supported hundreds of filmmakers across the continent, helping to position African stories within the global industry ecosystem. Her work has consistently bridged the gap between creative vision and market viability.

As an executive producer, Toni works closely with filmmakers to refine projects, secure partnerships, and navigate the complexities of funding, co-production, and distribution. Her extensive international network spans funders, festivals, and sales agents, enabling African films to access global audiences. Toni holds a Master of Law in Intellectual Property and currently serves as Chairperson of the Encounters Documentary Film Festival board. Her career reflects a sustained commitment to empowering new voices and advancing African storytelling on the world stage.

CONTACTS

International Press : Gary Springer
Gary@springerassociatespr.com

Africa Press : Sharlene Versfeld
sharlene@versfeld.co.za

Festivals, Sales and Distribution Inquiries
Riaya Aboul Ela
riaya@mojo-ent.com
+44 7867 927984

