

SURVIVAL IS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

GOD'S WORK

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MICHAEL JAMES

A MAVERICK RESISTANCE PRODUCTION

IN ASSOCIATION WITH KWAZULU NATAL TOURISM AND FILM AUTHORITY AND THE NATIONAL FILM AND VIDEO FOUNDATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

| STARRING THOBANI NZUZA | MBULELO RADEBE | OMEGA MNCUBE | ZENZO MSOMI | NDUDUZO KHOWA AND SIYA XABA

MUSIC BY GEORGE ACOGNY | EDITED BY DIONYSIS XENOS | DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JARED HINDE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS TONI MONTY | GARY SPRINGER CO PRODUCER MARCO ORSINI PRODUCER SITHABILE MKHIZE

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MICHAEL JAMES





Logline

A group of unhoused men seeking refuge in a crumbling building battle the brutalities of life on the streets, while their dreams and haunted memories blur the line between reality and illusion.

Title:	God's Work
Genre:	Social Drama/ Psychological Drama
Country of origin	South Africa
Language(s):	Zulu and English w/ English Subtitles
Running Time:	133 min

Writer / Director:

Composer:

Producer:

Co-Producer:

Executive Producers:

Production Company:

Cinematographer:

Post Production Supervisor:

Edited by:

Michael James

George Acogny

Sithabile Mkhize

Marco Orsini

Gary Springer and Toni Monty

Maverick Resistance Productions

Jared Hinde

Lacey Tu

Dionysis Xenos



SYNOPSIS

In the heart of Durban, South Africa, a crumbling building adorned with graffiti, shelters those who have fallen through the cracks of society. We meet a loose-knit community of friends, survivors, who grapple each day with the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future. While the harsh daily grind of poverty is inescapable, these men find resilience and meaning in companionship, and in the dreams, memories, and hopes of their sometimes-surreal interior worlds.

Among the group, the volatile Simphiwe (Thobani Nzuzi) rages against demons and communes with ghosts but still searches for redemption. Thobani (Mbulelo Radebe), his loyal friend, is a tender-hearted soul with a sense of humor, yearning for a fresh start in life. Khaya (Zenzo Msomi) has not long been on the street and hopes to be reunited with his daughter. Lucky (Nduduzo Khowa), nicknamed The Preacher, quotes the always-apt Book of Job. Malusi (Omega Mncube) is quiet but insightful; and Sizwe (Siya Xaba) is a younger kid still learning the street hustle.

Scores of other lives play out within the ramshackle shelter as well: the hallways are crowded with the comatose or dying victims of “resignation sickness,” seemingly an inability to wake up and confront conscious awareness. Woven in with the narrative drama is a deeper perspective, the shadowy manifestations of traumatized psyches revealed in hallucinatory imagery, sound, and music. Simphiwe, who mourns his lost mother, brother, and lover, is more alive dreaming of the past than stumbling through his waking hours; his dreams are accompanied by the hallucinatory figure of a spectral young man in death’s-head powdery whiteface. Is this his younger self? Is this vision his vanished brother? Is he a comfort, an adversary, a victim, or an omen?

As the friends hang out, get high, hatch schemes, and endure hopes and disappointments, their confrontations with the external world verge on the absurd. Outside their fragile sanctuary, the world presses in. A documentary filmmaker arrives, promising to tell their stories—whether they want him to or not. A puffed-up government official surveys their existence with indifference, and well-meaning outsiders offer sympathy that cannot change their fate. And then, there’s the ever-present threat of brutal police violence ready to be unleashed on street people with nowhere to go. For the police, ‘God’s Work’ is scooping the unhoused off the city streets and dumping them far from view—or worse. For the unhoused, survival itself is just another act of resistance.

These weary men care for each other, through a shared cigarette, a joke, a whispered song—fragments of life that hold back the darkness, if only for a moment. God’s Work is a portrait of resilience, a meditation on memory, and an unflinching gaze into the unseen lives of those discarded by the world.



PRODUCTION NOTES

The plight of the poor and unhoused is a starkly present and concrete problem throughout the world today, but for Michael James, writer and director of *God's Work*, attempting to portray that plight calls for storytelling that transcends the conventional narrative of social realism.

“My intent with *God's Work* is to engage with both the internal and external worlds of the characters,” says James, “and to allow the audience deeper access into the surreal and often troubling recesses of the human mind.” A compelling group portrait of street survivors in Durban, South Africa, and an audacious exploration of film style, *God's Work* is a thoughtful inquiry into what it means to be human in an unjust world.

As a narrative feature film, *God's Work* grew out of James' experimentation with documentary form and its limits. “Pre-COVID I had experimented with stories about people on the margins of society, mostly from a documentary perspective,” explains James, whose background in philosophy and theatre inform his approach to cinema.

“My goal was to move an audience not just to empathize, but to feel really disturbed and disrupted in their own lives. Then during the COVID lockdown, the Durban government set up camps for homeless people, and I was invited to do some photography and filming there. In one of those camps, a group of guys introduced themselves to me as filmmakers, and it sparked an interesting and beautiful relationship. I started going there every week. That is how I spent the lockdown, doing scriptwriting workshops.



“Through these workshops I saw how homeless people were fictionalizing much of their life stories, and how that enriched them, how their fictionalized stories conveyed more truth in a way than the straight facts. My own presence there was even a fiction; I was trying to figure out how, as a middle-class young White man, I fit in this space where I had not had this kind of life experience. I tried several different documentary approaches, but they never really felt like they were getting at the truth of what I saw and felt.”

Two powerful films that James saw at the time inspired the melding of cinematic genres that he eventually brought to *God’s Work*: *La Haine*, Matthieu Kassovitz’s searing 1995 drama of violence and oppression in a working-class suburb of Paris; and, on a very different plane of perception, *Encounters at the End of the World*, Werner Herzog’s 2007 documentary about Antarctica and the eccentric scientists and characters who staff an isolated research station there.

As James recalls, “There is this outlandish moment in the film where Herzog is narrating it as if aliens are arriving at the end of history. I know from his work that he fictionalizes truth to get to a deeper truth, so it sparked the idea: I’m going to take some of these ideas that have been inside of me, take the drama of *La Haine*, and the craziness of Herzog, and I think I wrote the first drafts of the script in three or four sleepless nights, and that launched a fiction story from there.”

In the documentary filmmaking-within-the-film that we witness in *God’s Work*, the documentarian—played by Michael James himself—alienates his subjects by bringing the unwelcome presence of a government representative into their sanctuary.

The abrupt falling-out that follows underlines the tension James sought to illuminate between the city’s destitute population, largely Black, and the comfortable White world that may be well-intentioned but lacks understanding. In real life, however, “We never had that conflict; my relationship is still to this day incredibly beautiful with those guys. In the film I wanted to try to be as critical of my presence there as possible, and still be a bit humorous, because if you are going to laugh at someone, laugh at yourself.”



The decision to create a scripted fiction film using professional actors allowed James to pursue a certain playfulness with cinematic form, to open his story to different layers of perception for both the characters and the audience. Using varying lenses, lighting schemes, and aspect ratios, he submerses us in different levels of reality. Regular chronological narrative flow unfolds slowly with long static takes and naturalistic darkness and light. We can feel the banality and absurdity of hours passing aimlessly. But when we are in Simphiwe's chaotic, surreal inner world (the haunted main protagonist), past, present, and future are interchangeable, as are fantasy and reality. Constant camera movement, a narrow, constricting aspect ratio, and hallucinatory lighting and sound plunge us into Simphiwe's anguish. A third format—documentary-style handheld camera, zoom moves, raw cuts—are visual cues about cinema vérité, but also reveal its inadequacy, demonstrated by the failed efforts of the documentary filmmaker to capture his subjects in depth.

There is a fourth level that James calls “the archival world” of memory, enacted by the clip of one of cinema's founding artifacts: the Lumière Brothers' Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat from 1896. As the light and sound of a train washes over Simphiwe's sleeping form at the beginning and end of the film, it is as if film history itself is washing over this exploration of human suffering. An old DV cam with a blocky screen frame records Simphiwe's confessional retrospections, the throwback technology signalling memory

Viewers can spot other sly genre citations as well, from an orchestrated singing number hinting at musical comedy, to a Waiting for Godot homage as the men find themselves stranded by a lone tree in the countryside. (“I'm obsessed with Godot” confesses James.)

Despite these various genre and technical treatments, the viewer is caught up in the storytelling as a cohesive whole. “We tell ourselves stories every day to just get out of bed,” muses James, “or, in the characters' cases, to just get up and move, to not overdose on drugs, to not succumb to trauma and despair. In Simphiwe's case, he finds the stories that keep him going in dreams and memories and in his interior life.”



Sleeping, waking, and dreaming are pervasive themes throughout *God's Work*. "You can't wake up if you don't fall asleep!" is the rallying cry of the zealous young activist who tries to rouse the homeless men to resistance. But they are afraid to fall asleep—afraid that they might join the victims of "resignation sickness" who pile up, comatose, along the squat-house hallways. "Resignation sickness is actually a real documented syndrome that has been observed in migrant groups," explains James. "People on the margins of society eventually reach a point where the future is so un-determinable, you realize that no matter what plans you have there is no way to escape the despair for which you are heading. You fall into a coma, and some people die."

The actual syndrome has not been found in Durban, so I am not using it as a concrete plot device; it is more a symbol of the psychosis of trauma manifested physically." At the end of *God's Work*, the exhausted, demoralized friends fall headlong into deep sleep, perhaps succumbing to the sleeping sickness. But, as we have learned earlier in the film, victims of this sickness do not dream, and our protagonists are all dreaming of the Lumière Brothers' train—still immersed in storytelling.

Postscript, we are shown the cast and crew of *God's Work* behind the scenes: they are actors taking a break on a location, surrounded by cameras, cables, and lights. Inspired by Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, James explains why he chose to leave the viewer with this unfiltered documentary view:

"For all the tough questions about homelessness and despair, there are not any easy answers. And so, the only answer I have is to pull back and say it is not real, it is a film. That gives us more space to stop and think about it, as opposed to an ending that shuts a heavy door and leaves us wondering, are the characters dead or asleep? Instead, it becomes more a poetic dialogue with oneself at the end."

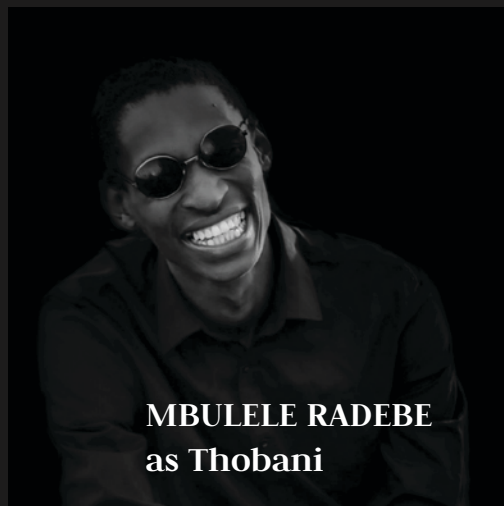
Back when we humans were just living through our winters in caves, with light flickering on the cave walls, we spun illusions and dreams and fantasies into story. That is one of the reasons we have survived so long, because we have been able to make up stories that are not real but are more real than the stories that are real."



KEY CAST



THOBANI NZUZA
as Simphiwe



MBULELE RADEBE
as Thobani



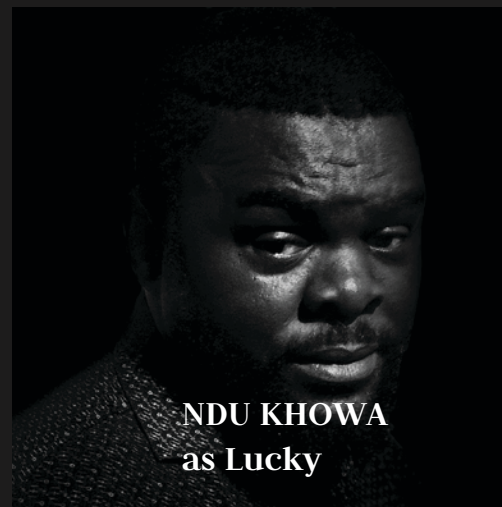
OMEGA NCUBE
as Malusi



ZENZO MSOMI
as Khaya



SIYA XABA
as Sizwe



NDU KHOWA
as Lucky

MICHAEL JAMES

WRITER AND DIRECTOR

Michael is a Durban-based filmmaker, writer, academic, and artist passionate about storytelling that challenges historical narratives. He explores the intersection of myth and history through multiple mediums, using film, theatre, and academia to interrogate identity, race, gender, class, and faith. Alongside his career teaching film, philosophy, and political science, he has written several award-winning plays, including *Things We Found in the Silence*, which won the PANSA National Award.

As a filmmaker, Michael has written, directed, and produced several works. His feature film, *Dreams of Gomorrah*, won three Simon Sabela Awards and two African Emerging Filmmaker Awards in 2020. The film is currently being distributed by MultiChoice across Africa. His documentary *Free Education: The Story of Bonginkosi Khanyile* premiered at the 2018 Encounters Documentary Film Festival before winning three awards at the African Diaspora Cinema Festival in Italy. Inspired by Tarkovsky, Godard, and Malick, his cinematic vision seeks to push artistic boundaries and redefine African storytelling.



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, Managing Director of A.M. Afrika Film Consultants, is a powerhouse in African cinema, guiding filmmakers from development to global success. With over 20 years in the industry, she has shaped groundbreaking initiatives that elevate African storytelling. As the former Head of Operations at the Durban Film Office and Director of Durban FilmMart, she played a pivotal role in positioning African films on the international stage. Her vast network of funders, co-producers, and industry leaders underscores her impact. Holding a Master of Law in Intellectual Property, Toni chairs the Encounters Documentary Film Festival board and has served on the KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission. Passionate about creative storytelling, she remains a driving force in Africa's film landscape.

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