

BASED ON AN EXTRAORDINARY TRUE STORY

# SKIN

NEVER GIVE UP.

ACADEMY AWARD® NOMINEE

**Sophie Okonedo**

**Sam Neill**

**Alice Krige**



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY FIONA EDWARDS



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*Skin* (Anthony Fabian, 2009) is one of the most moving stories to emerge from apartheid South Africa. Sandra Laing is a black child born in the 1950s to white Afrikaners who are unaware of their black ancestry. Her parents are rural shopkeepers serving the local black community, and lovingly bring her up as their 'white' little girl. But at the age of ten, Sandra is driven out of white society.

*Skin* is the story of Sandra's thirty-year journey from rejection to acceptance and from betrayal to reconciliation, as she struggles to define her place in a changing world and ultimately triumphs against all odds.

## THE STORY

Living in a country ruled by a legal system that segregated its population based on the colour of their skin, ten-year-old Sandra stands out as being distinctly African looking. Her parents, Abraham (Sam Neill) and Sannie (Alice Krige), are white Afrikaners unaware of their black ancestry. They are shopkeepers in a remote area of the Eastern Transvaal and, despite Sandra's mixed-race appearance, have brought her up as their 'white' little girl.

Sandra is sent to a whites-only boarding school in the neighbouring town of Piet Retief, where her (white) brother Leon (Hannes Brummer) is also studying, but parents and teachers complain that she doesn't belong. She is examined by state officials, reclassified as 'coloured' and promptly expelled from the school.

Sandra's parents are shocked, and Abraham fights through the courts (and the media) in an attempt to have the classification reversed.

The Population Registration Act of 1950, which required that each inhabitant of South Africa be classified and registered in accordance with their racial characteristics, was amended so that a person's colour was determined on parentage, not on skin colour alone; after this, Sandra becomes officially 'white' again.

But by the time she is seventeen, Sandra realises she is never going to be accepted by the white community. She falls in love with Petrus (Tony Kgoroge), a black man and local vegetable seller, and they begin an illicit love affair. When he learns of the relationship, Abraham threatens to shoot Petrus and disown Sandra. Meanwhile, Sannie is torn between

her husband's rage and her daughter's predicament.

Sandra elopes with Petrus to Swaziland. Abraham alerts the police, has them arrested and Sandra is imprisoned for three months. Sandra is told by the local magistrate to go home, but she refuses as she is pregnant with her first child.

Having made the choice to be with Petrus, Sandra begins a life in a black township that has no running water and no sanitation and which offers few opportunities to make a living. She and Petrus have two children; in order to keep them, Sandra has herself reclassified as 'black'. While she feels more at home in the black township community, Sandra desperately misses her parents and yearns for a reunion.

Sandra, Petrus and their family are forcibly relocated and any chance of ever reuniting with her parents appears remote. Sandra and Petrus' relationship soon disintegrates and Sandra is forced to flee with her children to Johannesburg, where she goes to the home of a relative. While she speaks to her mother by phone, her mother does not disclose her location nor initiate any reconciliation.



Upon the death of her father, Sandra receives some money from his estate and uses the authorities to track down her mother, who by this time is living in a nursing home following a stroke. A tearful and emotional reunion occurs and this is the catalyst for Sandra to come to terms with her life and who she is.

*Skin* is a story of family, forgiveness and the triumph of the human spirit.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

*Skin* would be enjoyed by middle and senior secondary students of English, History, Family Studies, Psychology, SOSE/HSIE, Sociology, Values Education and related subjects, and Media and Film Studies (particularly Film as Text, Cinema Studies and Screenwriting).

## GENRE

This is a feature film that is based on a true story and which can be classified as a biopic – a subgenre of the larger drama and epic film genres. Although the biopic reached the peak of its popularity in the 1930s, it has remained a key genre to this day.

It is important to remember that while the essence of the film is true, other elements have been added to ensure that the film works dramatically.

‘Biopic’ is a term derived from the combination of the words ‘biography’ and ‘picture’. These films depict and

dramatise the life of an important historical person (or group) from the past or present. Sometimes, historical biopics stretch the truth and tell a life story with varying degrees of accuracy.

Big-screen biopics cross many genre types, as the films might variously be about an outlaw; a criminal; a composer; a religious figure or leader of a movement; a military hero; an entertainer; an artist; an inventor, scientist or doctor; a politician or president; a sports hero or celebrity; or an adventurer.

In many cases, these films put an emphasis on the larger events (wars, political or social conditions) surrounding the person’s entire life as they rise to fame and glory. Some begin with the person’s childhood, but others concentrate on adult achievements.

Biopics have existed since the earliest days of silent cinema; examples are French filmmaker Georges Méliès’ feature-length epic *Jeanne D’Arc* (1900), *Joan the Woman* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1916) and the religious epic *Judith of Bethulia* (D.W. Griffith, 1914).

## STUDENT ACTIVITY

Discuss the biopics that you have seen.

- How different are they from

straight dramatic films?

- Did the movie stay true to real events?
- Did the movie seem to embellish the truth – if so how could the audience tell?
- What kind of research was undertaken? Did the filmmaker undertake primary research (eyewitness accounts, interviews and original documents) or secondary research (summary, collation and/or synthesis of existing research)?
- What kind of restrictions does a biopic place on a filmmaker?

## BEFORE VIEWING

Sandra Laing’s story is set against the backdrop of a racially segregated South Africa.

Before seeing the movie, it is important to spend some time discussing the politics and history of South Africa.

Apartheid was a system of legal racial segregation enforced by the National Party government of South Africa between 1948 and 1993, under which the rights of the majority ‘non-white’ inhabitants of South Africa were curtailed and minority rule by white people was maintained.

While racial segregation in South Africa began in colonial times, apartheid as an official policy was introduced following the general election of 1948.



## STUDENT ACTIVITY

The South African rebel tours were a series of seven cricket tours staged between 1982 and 1990. They were known as the rebel tours because South Africa was banned from international cricket due to the apartheid regime. As such, the tours were organised and conducted despite the express disapproval of national cricket boards and governments, the International Cricket Conference [now the International Cricket Council] and international organisations including the United Nations.

The tours were the subject of enormous contemporaneous controversy and remain a sensitive topic throughout the cricket-playing world.

Australian rebel cricket tours went to South Africa in 1985–86 and 1986–87.

- Research media articles about the rebel tours.
- What was public opinion?
- How were the cricketers viewed in Australia and received in South Africa?
- You are a journalist writing for the sports page of a metropolitan newspaper. Write a 400-word opinion piece on the rebel tours.

With the enactment of apartheid laws, racial discrimination became institutionalised. Marriage between non-whites and whites was prohibited, whites and non-white neighbourhoods were segregated, and many jobs were classified 'white only'. In 1950, the Population Registration Act required that all South Africans be racially classified into one of three categories: white, black (African) or coloured (of mixed descent). The coloured category also included major subgroups of Indians and Asians. Classifications were based on appearance, social acceptance and descent. A white person was defined as 'in appearance obviously a white person or generally accepted as a white person'. A person could not be considered white if one of his or her parents were non white. The determination that a person was 'obviously white' would take into account 'his habits, education, and speech and deportment and demeanor'. A black person would be of or accepted as a member of an African tribe or race, while a coloured person was neither black nor white. Non-compliance with the race laws was dealt with harshly. All blacks were required to carry 'pass

books' containing fingerprints, a photo and information on access to non-black areas.

From 1958, black people were deprived of their citizenship, legally becoming citizens of one of ten tribally based self-governing homelands called *bantustans*, four of which became nominally independent states. As well as employment, the government segregated education, medical care and a range of amenities such as parks and beaches, seats, toilets, waiting rooms and water fountains. Government services provided to black people were vastly inferior to those for white people.

- Many countries opposed apartheid in South Africa. How was this demonstrated?
- What is the rationale behind boycotts?
- What did Australians do to show their disgust at the regime?
- Sport and politics. Discuss the involvement of sport in bringing down apartheid in South Africa.



## IMPORTANT FIGURES IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

The struggle to abolish apartheid involved a number of significant figures including:

- » Nelson Mandela
- » Steve Biko
- » Winnie Madikizela-Mandela
- » F.W. de Klerk
- » Pik Botha

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Research one of the above personalities and present their story to the class. (Encourage visual montages and displays.)

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Share experiences watching interviews with significant political figures seen on television.

Discuss what information can be obtained through the television interview format and what factors constitute a successful interview with a public figure.

Invite students to watch, for a week, a news program that includes interviews with public figures. Have them keep a journal of the interviews, recording the following information:

- date, time and television channel or network on which the interview was broadcast
- name and background of the

- personality interviewed
- name and background of the television interviewer
- topics and/or questions raised during the interview
- information learned from watching the interview
- responses and reactions to the interview
- effectiveness of the interview.

Have students bring their journals to class and present their responses and findings.

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Prepare students to present a role-play interview between a television interviewer and a major figure who participated in the struggle against apartheid.

Have them work in pairs, with one student assuming the role of the interviewer and the other the subject. Students can choose one of the following subjects:

- journalist Donald Woods
- author Pierre Berton
- ANC leader Nelson Mandela
- Winnie Mandela
- former South African foreign minister Pik Botha
- former South African president F.W. de Klerk
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Each interview should be approximately five to ten minutes in length, with the interviewer introducing the in-

terviewee, providing some background information about him or her and his/her involvement in the apartheid issue, and then asking him/her questions to which he or she responds in role.

If possible, videotape the interviews so that students have the opportunity to review them later.

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Prepare a brief biographical report on the individual you researched for the interview, explaining and evaluating his or her role in the international struggle against apartheid in South Africa from the 1960s to the 1990s.

## THE END OF APARTHEID

The factors that led to the end of apartheid were:

- Pressure from inside the country. Members of the government began to have doubts about apartheid, and several parties opposed to apartheid also began to grow in South Africa from the 1970s. Widespread opposition among both black and white South Africans to apartheid policies helped to erode apartheid from within.
- External pressure, especially from Western nations, some of whom had extensive civil rights legislation. As the power of the Soviet Union began to decline, Western nations felt that apartheid could no longer be tolerated, and they began to actively speak out against it. This period also marked moves toward democracy and

self-determination in other African nations, as the West no longer feared the influence of Communism on nascent African governments. Numerous international politicians, diplomats and public officials condemned the policy of apartheid, and encouraged South Africa to bring it to an end.

- South Africa also experienced immense economic pressure to end apartheid. By the 1980s, banks and investment firms withdrew from South Africa, indicating that they would not invest in the country until its institutionalised racism came to an end. Many churches also applied pressure.
- Violent demonstrations from within and a mass organisation of angry South Africans.
- Appeals to apartheid laws started to occur in 1990 and four years later, South Africa had a democratic election and the last legal traces of apartheid were eliminated.

#### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Design a WebQuest on the history and politics of South Africa.

See samples:

- <http://www.zunal.com/webquest.php?w=69098>
- <http://www.zunal.com/process.php?w=8488>

### PUTTING IT ALL IN CONTEXT

Australia prides itself on being racially harmonious and having an integrated society. But was this always the case?

The White Australia Policy was a system of both official and unofficial discrimination in Australian history, during which immigration policy and citizenship requirements were heavily biased to favour white European migrants, and more specifically Anglo-Saxon migrants, over other races.

Aboriginal Australians did not enjoy many of the same freedoms and rights as other Australians until the 1967 referendum.

Although in the present day Australia generally prides itself on being one of the most multicultural of the 'Western-style' democracies, its past contains a long period of government-endorsed racism that, among modern Western democracies, was matched by few and possibly exceeded only by the apartheid regime of South Africa.

#### STUDENT ACTIVITY

- Research and discuss the White Australia Policy.
- Hold a class debate on the White Australia Policy.
- Discuss similarities and differences between the White Australia Policy and apartheid.

#### STUDENT ACTIVITY

- How is apartheid and racial segregation shown in the film *Skin*?
- List the ways in which blacks and whites are shown to be segregated in the movie.
- What observations do you make about racial segregation in the film *Skin*?

#### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Read the history of the project as told by Anthony Fabian. (pages 7-8)

#### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Discuss:

- What were the filmmaker's motivations for making the film?
- What were the hurdles?
- Why do you think that Fabian chose to make a feature film rather than a documentary?
- How did Sandra benefit from the film?
- How did the script develop? How important was it to have South Africans working on the script?
- What did the filmmaker find challenging when making the film?
- Is the end of the film the end of the story?
- How is the film relevant to you?

## AFTER VIEWING

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

At the beginning of the film *Skin*, its title is revealed in letters cut out of a black background. The letters advance towards the viewer, growing larger and larger, and the opening scene of the film – a 1994 election-day celebration – is revealed through them in high angle.

This opening points to the fundamental role skin and skin colour will play in the story of Sandra Laing.

Tell your life story 'through' your skin.

- Creatively describe your skin – try to be precise. Imagine your skin as a map to your life and experiences and explore its marks, colours and calluses.
- What clues might your skin reveal about your interests and enthusiasms, your sporting activities or mishaps, for example? What scars, if any, does your skin carry and of what stories do they remind you?
- What about tattoos? What other forms of 'decoration', if any, does your skin carry, or do you wish it carried?

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

*Mise en scène* is a French term and originates in the theatre. It means, literally, 'put in the scene'.

In film it has a broader meaning, and refers to almost everything that goes into the composition of the shot, including the composition itself: framing, movement of the camera and characters, lighting, set design and general visual environment, even sound as it helps elaborate the composition.

- Discuss the *mise en scène* of this film.
- How does the filmmaker move between time periods?
- How effective are the opening frames?
- Discuss the use of sepia in the opening frames, and the move to colour.

## HOW IT ALL BEGAN

I first heard the story of Sandra Laing in July 2000 on BBC's Radio 4. British journalist Peter White had gone to South Africa to interview Sandra and her testimony left me stunned. For days afterwards, I had a lump in my throat when I thought about her story and realised it had the potential to touch people around the world as a feature film. I also felt a tremendous sense of outrage that, after all she had been through, Sandra was still living in abject poverty, while her white family had prospered. I felt compelled to make some kind of reparation, and thought a film might help provide her with long-term financial security.

### Development

The first step was to secure Sandra's life rights. With the help of a couple of journalists in South Africa – Karien van der Merwe and Karen Le Roux – I managed to get Sandra's neighbour's telephone number in Tsakane township, East Rand (Sandra herself did not have a phone). I explained what I hoped to do, and asked whether she would consider assigning her life rights to me. She would be paid option fees, and eventually a reasonable sum of money if the film were made. She agreed to meet me. Six weeks after I had heard her interview on the radio, I was on a plane to South Africa – a country I had never visited before. My trip was brief and the goal simple: to gain Sandra's trust and hope that she might allow me to dramatise her story for the big screen. I met her family – her husband, her five children – and her mother, Sannie – who was still alive then (I took Sandra to see her, in a nursing home outside Pretoria; she hadn't been for several months because she couldn't afford the transport). When I boarded the plane back to London, armed with the rights to bring her story to the widest possible public, I knew this was the start of a very exciting adventure. What I could never have imagined was how long it would take to develop the script – how many writers and stages we would have to go through to get it right – such a complex story, spanning so many years

and begging so many questions.

Around this time, I also conceived the notion of selling the publication rights to Sandra's story: people kept asking me, 'Is there a book?' and I realised there probably should be. I was very lucky to have got the book commissioned from the first publisher I approached: Talk Miramax Books. Miramax Films had just set up an imprint for books they thought might make interesting films, so it seemed a natural port of call. The writer of the book, Judith Stone – an American journalist based in New York, contributing editor to Oprah Magazine – was chosen to give an 'outsider's perspective' on the story – which was primarily intended for an American readership, unfamiliar with South African history. The job of the book and the film is very different – one being factual, the other dramatic – and Judith Stone proved a very determined, hard working biographer, whose book, *When She Was White* was finally published in April 2007, to excellent reviews. The other happy outcome of the book's publication is that the contract I negotiated gave Sandra a generous advance and enabled her to buy her first home, in a peaceful suburb of Johannesburg. I also encouraged her to start her own business – a spaza shop in her converted garage – something sustainable. (Running a shop is in her blood, as her parents were shopkeepers.) So part of the dream was coming true: Sandra was better off, much happier and more confident in herself.

Meanwhile work began on the screenplay which was developed over several drafts written consecutively by Helena Kriel, Jessie Keyt, Helen Crawley and myself. In the meantime, I had been joined by Margaret Matheson of Bard Entertainments and Genevieve Hofmeyr of Moonlighting Films in South Africa as co-producers.

Although by then I had been to South Africa several times, had shot a one-hour documentary in Stellenbosch about the Spier Music Festival (*Township Opera*) – which told the story of the company that eventually made

the Golden Bear-winning feature film, *U-Carmen* – I still felt the need to have substantial input from South Africans, in order to do the story justice. So Margaret and I persuaded the UK Film Council to fund a three-week period of casting and script development workshops – using actors to improvise scenes based on a draft of the script I'd prepared before heading off to Johannesburg – so that we could test every scene and create new material. Moonlighting Films arranged the entire workshop process on the ground, with their usual, steadfast efficiency. We auditioned over ninety actors, chose fifteen, and it was a tremendously exciting and creative process – as well as wonderful to see the material finally coming alive. The workshops were very emotional and very cathartic – confirming the power of the story and emerging script.

### Packaging

Casting director Susie Figgis has a strong relationship with South Africa (her husband was born and brought up there) and she agreed to help us cast the stars, and eventually led us to Sophie Okonedo, who committed to playing the adult Sandra in July 2005. Sophie had just been nominated for an Oscar for *Hotel Rwanda* and it was quite a coup to have her attached to *Skin*. Not long afterwards, I met with Alice Krige – born in Uppington of Afrikaner parents and brought up in Port Elizabeth, who had made a career for herself in Hollywood. From the moment I met Alice, I felt I had come home: she fully embodied the role and I knew there was no need to look further.

In September 2006, the UK Film Council agreed to fund a 'pilot' – three short scenes from the film – which we could then use as a promotional tool to attract financiers, distributors and a sales agent. Pre-production lasted three weeks and production two days – and Moonlighting pulled out all the stops to ensure we had maximum bang for our minimal bucks. The pilot, which was post-produced in the UK, proved a very useful tool in attracting more stars and finance to the project.

In November 2006, Margaret Mathe-son approached the LA-based international sales agent Robbie Little, who had very successfully sold the Oscar-winning film *Tsotsi*, to sell *Skin*. Robbie took the project to the Berlin Film Festival and achieved an encouraging number of presales, including a cornerstone sale to France's UGC PH (Philippe Hellmann). All this arose from the strength of the script and Sophie Okonedo's commitment to the project. The other stars – including Sam Neill – had not yet come on board. The pre-sales subsequently gave confidence to investors such as the IDC and Aramid, who eventually financed the film.

### **Production**

We started production in September 2007 with the usual indie movie fears of too little time, not enough money. Our aim was to create a moving human drama that would also have an epic quality, as the story spans the turbulent final thirty years of apartheid.

The first task was to find a location that could serve as a unit base for the majority of the shoot. We had over fifty locations to cover in just forty-two days – so keeping those sets within a relatively contained area was critical if we were to have a fighting chance of shooting to schedule.

Things began well: I was taken to Remhoogte – the Laing Compound, as we renamed it – by the production designer, Billy Keam, on the first day of location scouting. North-east of Johannesburg, about fifteen minutes from the Hartbeespoort Dam, which serves as a weekend retreat for townies, we travelled down a long, rutted road, leaving clouds of red dust in our wake. We reached the crest of a hill, at the bottom of which sat a grove of pine and eucalyptus trees surrounding a complex of single-storey buildings. The hairs went up on the back of my neck: it looked exactly like the original Laing farm, three hundred kilometres away in Mpumalanga (then known as the Eastern Transvaal) – but this location was infinitely more practical, as our crew and equipment would be

coming from the big city.

What I didn't know was that this area (where we ended up basing ourselves for the first five weeks of the shoot) has a freakish micro-climate that attracts the greatest number of electrical storms in the world. (The amount of metal in the earth is a contributing factor; a few of us were staying near a platinum mine, and our roads were paved with ore.) Thankfully, the first week of production we were spared the lightning and the rain. Then summer decided to make an early visit. The heavens opened and it seemed as though they would never stop. The Laing Compound became mired in mud, many cars got stuck, and the cast and crew had to be rescued by the unit manager (the redoubtable Beate van Graan) in his four-by-four and I was beginning to fear we would never have enough dry hours to shoot our exteriors. (The film consists of equal numbers of interior and exterior sets.) You can make a lot of contingency plans when making a movie – but once you have shot all your interiors, there is nothing you can do but pray to the god of thunder to give you a break.

It wasn't all bad. Often, the weather would hold until just after our last shot – or not come until the end of the day. At the end of our second week, there was an electrical storm so violent, with so many flashes of lightning practically licking our vehicles as we drove through in convoy, that I became convinced I'd be struck before reaching the hotel. For most of this journey, I racked my brain, trying to assign my successor – not that I would have been able to communicate my choice, had I tried to death in the car. (I was later told that one of the safest places to be in an electrical storm is a car. True or false, it was reassuring.)

On another occasion, as we were attempting to finish a scene in a township, a dust and windstorm the like of which I've never seen began to kick up. The crew began to wrap, but our second cameraman, George Loxton, saw the sun setting magnificently over the mountains and couldn't bear to let it disappear unrecorded: he put the cam-

era high on the sticks, wrapped himself in a plastic sheet and, held down by his assistant, captured the massive lightning bolt that forked across the blood-red sky – a stunning bonus shot that made it into the film, before Sandra packs her belongings to leave Petrus.

Another massive challenge for the production was the sheer number of people on screen: seventy-seven speaking parts, babies of various ages (and colours), including a newborn, only twelve days old, and the hundreds – on one occasion nearly a thousand – extras we had to call on an ad hoc basis. Somehow, the production and assistant director team managed to bring, costume (and feed) all these people – including some of the finest actors South Africa has to offer – to the set every day, so that we rarely had to recast a role.

The most daunting scene for me, as a first-time feature director, was the forced removal scene, which involved hundreds of extras, animals (goats, dogs and chickens) period bulldozers, general mayhem and destruction, and a collapsible set ... But the skill of the cameraman, Dewald Aukema – who suggested we use as much special FX smoke as possible, to add to the confusion – and the efficiency of the highly experienced first AD, Mary Soan, who marshalled the extras – made it possible for us to film the entire sequence in just a day and a half. (It was scheduled for one day, but naturally the heavens opened in the middle of the afternoon, and we had to complete the scene the following day.)

It now feels like something of a miracle that, despite all the challenges posed by the number of locations, the large cast and the crazy weather, we managed to finish the film pretty much on time and on budget – and survived to tell the tale.

Anthony Fabian

<http://www.filmeducation.org/skin/imgs/InterviewSummary.pdf>



## PRODUCTION VALUES: LOOK AND STYLE OF THE FILM

While authenticity of dialogue and performances are crucial to how we respond to any film, it is the melding of the other elements – sometimes called technical aspects or production values – that really make a film convincing. They need to be authentic and appropriate for us to be convinced that this situation is ‘real’.

- Does this film seem real to you?
- What makes it real?

*Skin* was filmed entirely on location in and around Johannesburg, South Africa.

- How important was the setting to the authenticity of the film?
- Could you think of a different location that would have worked successfully?
- Describe several of the outdoor locations.

## STUDENT ACTIVITY

Choose a character from history.

You are a location scout for a film production company that is making a film (or television mini-series) about the character. Outline where you would film the movie and why.

There are a number of things to consider when choosing a location. These include:

- The cost of filming
- Whether the government is sympathetic to the story (Thailand refused to give permission for Hollywood actress and director Jodie Foster to film *The King and I* in the country so instead it was filmed in Malaysia).
- Weather
- Infrastructure.

## THE FILMMAKER

Directors who make feature films, whether based on true stories, fiction, original stories or screenplays, are working with actors playing roles. In this instance the filmmaker has worked with biographical material to tell a story, and engaged actors to play the part of the characters to recreate a story.

However, when filmmakers choose to explore the lives of living people, their approach to creating a truthful and engaging story becomes more complex and sometimes problematic.

- How is this so?

This disclaimer is included in the credits.

*Whilst this story is based on the life of Sandra Laing, it has been dramatised in a number of ways and a number of events and characters are entirely fictitious. Accordingly, any resemblance between them and actual characters or events is entirely coincidental.*

- Does this mean that the story is authentic or not?
- What is fact or fiction? Is it important for the audience to be able to separate fact from fiction?

## SCRIPT AND DIRECTION

What makes a good script and how crucial is it to the strength of a film?

- What are the main differences between a script for a play to be performed in a theatre, a script for a film or television program that is adapted from a novel, and an original screenplay?

- Is it important for filmmakers to maintain some distance from their subjects, or is a more engaged and friendly relationship with subjects more likely to produce a story that is both authentic and revealing?
- Did having South African writers working on the script (screenplay) make it more authentic?
- What do you see as the crucial events of the story that propel the narrative?
- Which scenes did you find most upsetting?

## CHARACTERS AND PERFORMERS

This film is very character driven.

Responding to characters:

- Are the characters in this film represented sympathetically?
- Do they change and grow over time or are their characters essentially static?
- Which of them display qualities, whether attractive or frightening, that you recognise?
- With which of these characters do you sympathise?
- Do you feel ambivalent about any of the characters?

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

- Write a 200-word piece outlining what you see as the major strengths in the performance of the

### PRINCIPAL CAST AND CREW OF *SKIN*

CAST	
Sandra Laing	Sophie Okonedo
Young Sandra	Ella Ramangwane
Sannie Laing	Alice Krige
Abraham Laing	Sam Neill
Leon Laing	Hannes Brummer
Adriaan Laing	Kaylim Willet
Petrus Zwane	Tony Kgoroge
CREW	
Director/ producer/writer	Anthony Fabian
Producer	Margaret Matheson
Producer	Genevieve Hofmeyr
Writer	Helen Crawley
Writer	Jessie Keyt
Writer	Helena Kriel
Composer	Hélène Muddiman

- actor you have chosen.
- Select two scenes that could be shown at an awards ceremony that best demonstrate what you have said in your recommendation.

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Read the article, starting below, about actress Sophie Okonedo.

- Discuss the similarities and differences between Sophie and Sandra.
- Discuss the difficulties for Sophie

playing a character that is still living.

- How important would it have been for Sophie to meet with Sandra?
- Comment on the evolution of Sandra's character throughout the film.

## SPEECHES AND SILENCES

What people say in this film, how they speak and the context in which they speak are crucial to our responses to the characters.

- Discuss how Sandra responds to her parents, teachers, whites and blacks.
- Describe Abraham's tone. What does it say about his character?
- Is Sannie a submissive character? Discuss.
- English is not the only language used in the film. How does the filmmaker integrate other languages?

## MUSIC

A film's soundtrack is made up of sounds and music, with composer and sound designer working closely to achieve complex moods. It's worth closing your eyes at certain points in this film to fully understand the many layers of this soundtrack.

Singer Miriam Stockley contributed to the music of the film, performing her own work as well as the work of oth-

### JEWISH ACTRESS SOPHIE OKONEDO EXPLORES BIRACIAL IDENTITY

By Naomi Pfefferman

'I'm a North London, working-class, black, Jewish girl,' actress Sophie Okonedo said. 'I love my upbringing because it had so many different colours; it's given me the equipment to play lots of diverse roles.'

In 2005, the tall, striking actress burst into the international spotlight when she was nominated for an Oscar for her harrowing turn as the wife of a hotel manager who hid more than 1,200 refugees from genocidal militias in *Hotel Rwanda* [Terry George, 2004]. As the unexpected new toast of Hollywood – *Newsweek* described her performance as a 'revelation' – she went on to portray an emotionally disturbed young woman in civil rights-era South Carolina in *The Secret Life*

*of Bees* [Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2008].

Now she has tackled her first leading role in *Skin*, based on the true story of Sandra Laing, a biracial girl born to white parents – unaware of a black ancestor in their family tree – in 1950s South Africa. The film chronicles the parents' battle for Sandra to be classified as 'white', her rebellion and marriage to a black man and subsequent struggle to be reclassified

Continued overleaf ...

as ‘colored’ to keep her children. At one point in the film, Laing’s parents learn the ten-year-old Sandra cannot continue to live in their home unless she is documented as a household servant.

The script stunned Okonedo when it arrived at her North London home not long after her Oscar nomination. ‘The story was so extraordinary I almost couldn’t believe it was true,’ she said from the flat she shares with her twelve-year-old daughter.

And then there was the personal connection for Okonedo, 40, who was raised by her Ashkenazi mother and Yiddish-speaking grandparents after her father, a Nigerian civil servant, abandoned the family when Sophie was 5.

‘I could relate to being black and brought up in a white family,’ she said. ‘Of course being raised in North London in the 1970s was much kinder than South Africa in the ’50s. But it was helpful to understand what it is like to have a family that is a different color than you – and to question your heritage when people say, “That can’t possibly be your mum.”’

Okonedo was the only black congregant at the liberal synagogue she attended with her grandparents, although she refuses to discuss previous remarks she reportedly made about encountering discrimination from both blacks and Jews.

She also declines to discuss her estranged father, Henry Okonedo, who left Sophie and her mother, Joan (née Allman), in poverty when he returned to Nigeria. Okonedo spent her formative years in a dangerous housing project, notorious for drugs and criminal violence. When a government worker paid the family a visit, he asked what they did with all the books in a large bookcase. ‘Because of course poor people don’t read,’ Okonedo told London’s *Daily Mail*.

Eventually Joan, a hairdresser and Pilates instructor, was able to afford a flat above a fish and chips shop. The actress’ mother infused young Sophie with the sense that she could accomplish anything, and her grandparents, who had been born to Russian and Polish immigrants in London’s East End (England’s equivalent of the Lower East Side), remained central figures in her life, regaling her with stories of her great-great-grandfather and other forbears depicted in old photographs.

‘My grandparents kept a fairly Jewish household,’ Okonedo said. ‘They celebrated all the holidays, and they spoke Yiddish when they didn’t want me to understand the conversation. I feel sad I didn’t learn Yiddish as a child,’ she added. ‘It’s such a fantastic language, so expressive. And now my grandparents are too old to teach me.’

Now that her grandparents are in their 90s, the family holiday celebrations have ceased. ‘But culturally I’m still very Jewish,’ Okonedo said. ‘It’s all in my blood.’

Over the years, her mother has remained Okonedo’s staunchest champion – encouraging her to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art after she dropped out of school at 16, and later traveling with her to theater and movie sets to attend to her hair. ‘I’m not very good at the whole dressing-up thing,’ Okonedo said.

Her big break in a mainstream film came in 2002, when Stephen Frears cast her as a kind-hearted prostitute in *Dirty Pretty Things*, which revolved around the struggle of an illegal immigrant from Nigeria in London. Okonedo herself once visited Nigeria, and she acknowledges that her roles in *Hotel Rwanda* and *Skin* are perhaps attempts to explore the African side of her identity.

It was her mother who was by her side, however, when Okonedo’s cell phone rang with the news that she had been nominated for a best

supporting actress Oscar for *Hotel Rwanda*. The two women were visiting an art gallery located in a stately mansion in London: ‘My mum just stood in the middle of the room and started screaming,’ the actress recalled. When a guard reprimanded her, Joan declared, ‘I don’t give a f---. My daughter has just been nominated for an Academy Award.’ The entire gallery burst into applause as the two women triumphantly strutted outside, where Joan, the seventy-year-old Pilates teacher, turned cartwheels on the sidewalk.

The close relationship Okonedo has with her mother bears little resemblance to Laing’s experience. After she eloped with a Zulu-speaking vegetable peddler at the age of 16, Laing was disowned by her conservative parents and only reconnected with her mother after her father’s death.

Okonedo met Laing a few times on the set in South Africa: ‘She was sweet but very shy and spoke English only as a second language,’ Okonedo said. Their conversations were short and generic: ‘I couldn’t very well ask her, “How did you feel being abandoned by your father?”’

The film’s director, Anthony Fabian, described the drama as ‘a journey into color’. It also ‘tackles the eternal human question: Who am I and where do I belong?’ he wrote in a statement.

Okonedo agreed. ‘Sandra constantly had these breakdowns and crises of identity,’ she said. ‘Because of her unique circumstances, there was no one for her to relate to and no collective for her to join. That’s a very frightening place for any human being to be. You feel like you’re falling all the time, falling through space with nothing to hold onto.’

- [http://www.jewishjournal.com/film/article/jewish\\_actress\\_sophie\\_okonedo\\_explores\\_biracial\\_identity\\_skin\\_20091020/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/film/article/jewish_actress_sophie_okonedo_explores_biracial_identity_skin_20091020/)



ers. Born in Johannesburg, her work is heavily influenced by African music.

African music features strongly in this soundtrack. It differs markedly from music from the West.

- Is that important?
- How does indigenous music add to the film?

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Pick some music from another part of the globe and discuss its attributes and its specific, identifying qualities.

- What are the different instruments used?
- Is there a focus on vocals?

### STUDENT ACTIVITY

Below is an interview between Sandra Laing and a journalist from the online publication Women and Hollywood <<http://womenandhollywood.com/2009/10/30/interview-with-sandra-laing-real-life-subject-of-skin/>>.

**Women & Hollywood:** How did the film come about?

**Sandra Laing:** Tony Fabian the director of the film phoned me in 2000 that he wanted to meet me and told me that he wanted to make a film about my life. I agreed because other people – newspaper and TV people – always came to me and they just took the story and went, and in Tony’s case I felt that he was the one who would change my life. He did but it took seven years to make the film.

**W&H:** Did he change your life?

**SL:** Yes, I was staying in a small rented house wasn’t working and couldn’t support my children, but now I am in a bigger house and my life is much better.

**W&H:** What was the hardest part for you to watch in the film?

**SL:** The time when I called my mother from my cousin’s house which was the first time I spoke with her after ten or fifteen years since I left home but I still didn’t know where she was staying she didn’t tell me. And then the time when I found her in the old age home.

**W&H:** Why do you feel it was important for your story to get out there?

**SL:** I wanted to let the world know what apartheid did to a person in South Africa and to let people know that if something happens to you long ago and you are scared to talk you must talk about it and let it out and you can then go on with your life.

**W&H:** In the press notes you say that this is a story of family, forgiveness and the triumph of the human spirit. Have you forgiven your family?

**SL:** Yes, I have forgiven my family. I didn’t get a chance to ask forgiveness from my father but I did see my mother before she died and now just my brothers are left.

**W&H:** Have you spoken with them?

**SL:** They don’t want to speak to me. They are still angry with me from when I left home and when I chose black people over them.

**W&H:** It is so hard to rationalise what you must have felt – you were white but had black skin. What can your experience teach people about racial issues?

**SL:** I think you mustn’t see a person

through color whether she is black or white or brown. We are all the same. We all have the same blood. Inside we are all the same.

**W&H:** Were you ever on the set? What did you think about Sophie Okonedo playing you?

**SL:** Sophie is a brilliant actor. I do see me in her acting. She is doing the same things that happened to me.

**W&H:** Anything else you would like to add?

**SL:** Ask people to pray for me so that my brothers will one day come and see me.

- If you were the journalist what else would you like to know?

## RESOURCES

<http://www.apartheidmuseum.org/supplements/issue5/index.html>

### Other suggested film (biopic) resources:

*Cry Freedom* (Richard Attenborough, 1987)  
*A World Apart* (Chris Menges, 1988)

### Apartheid genre movies:

<http://www.movierevie.ws/genres/391/1/Apartheid.html#ixzz1BFi6ZTn0>

### Skin official site:

<http://www.skinthemovie.net/site/>

### Reviews:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/jul/24/film-review-skin>  
<http://www.filmink.com.au/review/skin-film/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

It has been twenty years since the South African authorities agreed to free Nelson Mandela – the man who would lead the struggle to end the country's policy of racial segregation and create a multi-racial democracy.

In this audio slideshow using material from the BBC archives, you can see how he left his cell after twenty-seven years to become South Africa's first black president.

- BBC Audio slideshow: Long walk to freedom <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8508592.stm>>
- Archive video: Nelson Mandela freed after twenty-seven years in prison <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8509253.stm>>

### See also:

- Controversy over ANC youth leader <<http://www.theworld.org/2010/04/19/controversy-over-anc-youth-leader/>>
- Free speech around the world <<http://www.theworld.org/2009/09/30/free-speech-around-the-world/>>
- The Reunion: Release of Nelson Mandela <<http://www.theworld.org/2009/09/15/the-reunion-release-of-nelson-mandela/>>



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