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## **The Wound (15)**

*dir:* John Trengove

*Starring:* **Nakhane Touré, Bongile Mantsai, Niza Jay Ncoyini**

*sponsors:* **Special Edition Chocolate**

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**Synopsis:** South Africa, the present. City factory worker Xolani returns to his home village, to be the 'caregiver' to city boy Kwanda and prepare him for the traditional Xhosa ceremony marking the transition to manhood. He rekindles his secret relationship with Vija, a childhood friend. Kwanda is attracted to Xolani too. He notices that Xolani and Vija are close. He finds them after they have made love. Kwanda flees. Xolani catches up with him. He pushes Kwanda off some rocks to his death and returns to the city.

An intriguing sense of immersion soon gives way to familiarity and over explanation in John Trengove's debut feature *The Wound*, which attempts to mine and archaic-seeming Xhosa initiation ritual in rural South Africa for the insights it provides into sexuality, masculinity and class in the country today. Yet while the film is happy to thrust viewers into the thick of the homoerotic ceremony and allow them to navigate its complex dynamics themselves, such specific concerns are progressively drowned out as a stock love triangle of gay longing takes centre stage. Even the most meticulously chosen of settings is of little use when relegated to the background.

Although the solitary, reserved Xolani has worked in a modern factory in Johannesburg for some time now, he still retains close links to the community he hails from in the mountains outside the city via his recurring role as a 'caregiver' in its annual initiation ceremony, which involves a group of late adolescent boys being publicly circumcised and spending the next two weeks in the wilderness before returning home as men. For this year's ritual, Xolani has been entrusted with guiding an affluent, and usually headstrong city boy named Kwanda, whose father is already concerned with his potential homosexual leanings. Kwanda is not the only one grappling with such feelings, though, as Xolani is quick to rekindle his on-off affair with his more traditionally macho-seeming childhood friend Vija, who also acts as a caregiver in the ceremony but, unlike Xolani, long since has a family.

In spite of its carefully down-played treatment, Xolani and Vija's first sexual encounter can't help but feel somewhat generic when set against the more transgressive aspects of the initiation ritual, whose wash of competing messages is only emphasized by its presentation *in medias res*. The circumcision scene itself for example, presents a large group of men watching with rapt



attention as foreskins are sliced away and masculinity avowed, with the deliberately skittish handheld camera work only emphasizing the sense that standard categories are now free-floating. When Xolani gently paints Kwanda's face and dresses his wound in the hut just a short while later, there's a similar sense that pain and power relations are one step away from desire. And when the entire initiation party gets together around a campfire to drink, dance and occasionally awkwardly and brace, it's actually one of the elders who shines in with an anecdote that ends in mention of a bulging penis, implying that the ceremony's blurred boundaries leave a lasting impression.

Yet instead of probing deeper into any of the pleasingly ambiguous markers of masculinity on display or taking them to an equally indeterminate place, the film focuses on the increasingly conventional erotic push and pull between the three main characters, as Xolani and Vija continue to meet for sex in secret, which doesn't escape Kwanda's notice, even as he tries to act on his own attraction to Xolani. Unfortunately, however, this narrowing of focus is also accompanied by an increasing obviousness in the dialogue, where largely self-evident feelings and situations are spelt out in redundant fashion, whether in relation to Xolani and Vija's troubled affair, Kwanda's affluence and accompanying outsider status.

As each and every incident begins to feel begins to feed into the central love triangle, which ends in predictable violence, there's a nagging sense that the entire ritual is perhaps little more than regionally specific window dressing for a story of repressed desire whose stock drama could equally stem from elsewhere; just another form of striking scenery, like the often ravishing landscapes through which the tortured trio move. With the chance of seeing films from Africa either in the UK or even on the festival circuit still the exception rather than the rule, the desire for greater exposure might explain the cultural homogenization apparent in *The Wound*, whether at a level of plot or in the meek, by now wearying nods in the camera work and editing to the Dardenne brothers or Terrence Malick. But what does a cinema actually tell us about the place it was made when it feels like it could come from anywhere?

## Credits

<b>Xolani 'X'</b>	Nakhane Touré
<b>Vija</b>	Bongile Mantsai
<b>Kwanda</b>	Niza Jay Ncoyini
<b>Babalo</b>	Thobani Mselini
<b>Khwalo</b>	Gabriel Mini
<b>Director</b>	John Trengove
<b>Screenplay</b>	John Trengove, Thando Mgqolozana, Malusi Bengu
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Paul Özgür
<b>Editing</b>	Matthew Swanepoel
<b>Music</b>	João Orecchia
<b>Sound</b>	Matthew James
<b>Costume</b>	Lehasa Molloyi

**S.Africa/Germany/  
Netherlands/France/Italy  
2017  
88 mins**

### Another View

An imposing undercurrent of portent, of grand repercussions stemming from quiet beginnings, is apparent from the off in John Trengove's delicate film about youth and sexuality. As Xolani, Nakhane Touré plays a caregiver for the young men attending a South African initiation who is forced to keep his sexual orientation under wraps.

No-frills camerawork and sparse, ambient sound design add to the air of insularity endured by Xolani. Forced to hide from the conservatism of his peers, his assignations with Bongile Mantsai's Vija seem a well-kept secret until the arrival of Niza Jay Ncoyini's city-boy Kwanda. Seeing through their act, Kwanda comes under Xolani's care as he sets upon the path to manhood, all the while posing a threat to the security of all three men.

Within this unassuming technical framework it falls upon the actors to carry the film.

Thankfully, all excel in their approach to portraying the disparate attitudes of these three embattled individuals. Touré in particular offers a beautifully understated performance that, from the first tortured look slipped past Kwanda's father when he recognises himself in the stories of the man's repressed son, reveals all he has been pressured to withhold. Mantsai's portrayal of a man at war with his own sexuality perfectly explores the need to mask the truth with classical 'butch' masculinity, as well as the correlations between sex, power and control.

That said, one major misstep occurs in its final moments. An uncharacteristic show of aggression comes close to undermining the subtlety of all that came before. It's a shame given the nuance on show elsewhere, though the insights demonstrated throughout easily provide enough reason to overlook this misjudged ending.

### Joe Boden: Little White Lies

#### **Our next screening: Friday March 1st, 7.30pm Jeune Femme (France 2017, Cert 15)**

Paula (a stellar performance by Laetitia Dosch) is a muddle of contradictions. Fresh from an unceremonious dumping by her boyfriend of 10 years, she finds herself wandering the streets of Paris - jobless, homeless and single - with no idea of what life holds for her next. At 31 years old, with little to show for it but a kidnapped cat and a sense of adventure, she sets out to reinvent herself with a new job, new friends, a new life and finds that these things never come easily.