

## Tsotsi (film)

### Read the film review.

1. Spot the positive and/or negative features the film critic mentions about the film.
2. What does the review miss in your opinion?
3. What are the things you agree most and/or disagree most?
4. Underline at least three expressions used by the film critic, you like and want to learn.
5. Spot the characteristics/outline of a good film review.

### 1

Twice in Gavin Hood's Oscar-winning *Tsotsi*, we see a train pull into a station. What seems like a straightforward moment--in fact, it's the oldest shot in cinema--turns threatening when we realize that the camera is hovering above the tracks, in the way of the train, ready to be smashed. Ever so slowly, the camera glides out of the way; the train just barely misses it, and by extension, us. The moment stuck with me because it perfectly encapsulates the South African movie's simmering sense of menace. *Tsotsi* is a movie about survival, but the train is there to let you know that you can only dodge it for so long. Sooner or later, it's gonna hit you.

Stepping off that train are Tsotsi and his gang: his nickname translates as "thug," and it is well deserved. When we meet him, he's stabbing people for money and starts fights with homeless men in wheelchairs. Portrayed by Presley Chweneyagae as a cypher full of a rage, Tsotsi is a seething live wire who believes in nothing and will beat his own friends to a bloody pulp at the slightest provocation.

But Tsotsi's hand-to-mouth shantytown life changes after he shoots a woman in a wealthy Johannesburg suburb and steals her car--as well as her baby, which happened to be in the back seat. At first, Tsotsi simply deposits the child in a paper bag under his bed, but eventually he tries to feed it, changes diapers, and procures baby food at gunpoint. While his gang is tempted to work for the local goon and the child's parents and the police search frantically, the baby in Tsotsi's care slowly rekindles his capacity for empathy. As Tsotsi struggles, Chweneyagae's performance grows richly complicated, teetering between Tsotsi's ruthless thug exterior and the wounded young man who is hiding behind it. It is thrilling to watch his slow transformation, a melting into kindness that is its own reward, no matter where it leads.

Based on the novel by Athol Fugard, *Tsotsi* tells a life-affirming story, but Gavin Hood's punchy direction avoids sentimentality. There's a healthy dose of Fernando Meirelles' third world cool in the hip-hop inflected shots of the shantytown, but being a gangster here isn't nearly as much fun as in *City of God*. The world of *Tsotsi* is cruel and unforgiving, and Hood doesn't allow himself any ironic detachment to soften the blows. In one scene, Tsotsi revisits his childhood home, which turns out to be a stack of abandoned cement pipes at the outskirts of the township where homeless kids spend their nights. Even brief moments of

respite are fraught with sadness.

(<http://worldfilm.about.com/od/africanfilms/fr/tsotsi.htm>) Rating: 4 out of 5

## 2

*Tsotsi* is an extremely powerful foreign film about a teenage gangster (Presley Chweneyagae) living in the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa. He stays above the poverty line by heading a ruthless gang that assaults rich people at gunpoint and then pockets their money. After fleeing from an abusive home at an early age and growing up on the streets, Tsotsi (nickname for 'thug') develops a ragged [edge](#) that allows him to live a corrupt life without the slightest tinge of remorse. It's a dog-eat-dog world, and he'd rather bite than be bitten.

After beating up one of his gang members for prying into his personal life, Tsotsi goes on the prowl for another victim. He finds it when he spots a woman stepping out of her silver BMW, trying to fix the faulty electrical gate guarding her mansion. Seeing the situation as a prime opportunity for a carjacking, he shoots at her and speeds away. He thinks he has made the perfect getaway, until he hears screechy cries emitting from the backseat, and is horrified to find a 3-month-old staring back at him.

This startling new discovery causes him to crash the car, and run away with as much money as he can grab. But the crying persists, and he can't seem to walk away, no matter how hard he tries. He places the infant in a large, brown shopping bag and heads home to his tiny, ant-infested living space. It is clear early on that fatherhood is not a role that suits him well, as he places a newspaper and a sock on the baby in place of a diaper. When the baby is hungry, Tsotsi follows a young, beautiful mother named Miriam (Terry Pheto) and holds her at gunpoint until she nurses the abducted child.

*Tsotsi* is not an easy movie to watch, but it grabs you by the collar and never eases its grip. Closed-minded people like to believe that change is impossible, and that someone with all the makings of a social defect has no shot of crawling out of the dark. The film challenges that viewpoint by showing a menacing criminal that seems completely hopeless, until an unexpected incident threatens to humanize him. Director [Gavin Hood](#) keeps the movie moving at a breezy, unsentimental clip with a fast-paced, gritty style similar to *City Of God*, while energetic Kwaito music blasts throughout the picture. He keeps *Tsotsi* away from pretentious narration that tells us what to feel, and instead lets things unfold naturally.

The lead character, played with impressive raw talent by newcomer Presley Chweneyagae, serves as both the hero and the villain of the story. His brown eyes have a maniacal glare, where he seems like he could either snap or burst into tears at any given moment. The central storyline is watching Tsotsi try and raise this child and change into a better man, while the parents struggle desperately to find the baby he has stolen. He is not a good man, but he isn't the caricature of a heartless bad guy either. *Tsotsi* is an honest depiction of a man who may have gone astray, but like the rest of us, has a chance for something better. The road to redemption is often paved with potholes.

(<http://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/Tsotsi-1434.html>)

### 3

Set in a shantytown in the suburbs of Johannesburg, *Tsotsi* follows a young gangster on a short journey to humanization. When the film opens, we discover Tsotsi (Presley Chweneyagae) and his posse as they stab a man to rob his wallet—a brutal premise aiming at establishing this group of teenagers as a pack of animals stripped of any moral and emotional sense. They are predators who steal and kill to survive according to the basic laws of nature, and even though their attitude is shocking, writer/director Gavin Hood—who's working from a novel by renowned playwright Athol Fugard—doesn't offer a judgmental look at the protagonists, rather presenting them through an anthropological angle showing that their behavior is the result of the environment they grew up in.

However, a couple of incidents will take Tsotsi off the beaten—thug—path: the discovery of a baby in a stolen car as well as an encounter with a homeless man suddenly awakes some new feelings in him and, within a short period of six days, he will transform from animal into human being.

Bathed in gorgeous cinematography and featuring outbursts of violence, *Tsotsi* reveals its beauty in its roughness. Hood successfully entices spectators into this contrasted portrait of an individual and, through a metaphor, of the world he embodies—the name "Tsotsi" means street/gang thug in South Africa.

While it's hard not to fall for this film—and I certainly fell for it while watching it—, most particularly because of Chweneyagae's vibrant performance, *Tsotsi* is a fairly formulaic picture, which is based on the association of "winning" screenwriting elements such as street violence and redemption, set in an exotic background. Despite its stature as a foreign film, which brings additional credibility, *Tsotsi* is at heart a mainstream—and arguably commercial—film, which transposes the Martin Scorsese formula from Brooklyn to South Africa while surfing on the success of *City of God*, using the slums to position itself somewhere between social commentary and exoticism. What made *City of God* a much better film than *Tsotsi* was its documentary-like and uncompromising approach, while, with its feel-good sensitivity and aesthetic direction, *Tsotsi* is clearly aimed at seducing festivals—spectators and juries alike—and by looking at the number of audience awards it gleaned, from Toronto to Edinburgh and here at AFI, it certainly succeeds at that level.

(<http://www.plume-noire.com/movies/reviews/tsotsi.html>)

### 4

How strange, a movie where a bad man becomes better, instead of the other way around. "Tsotsi" a film of deep emotional power, considers a young killer whose cold eyes show no emotion, who kills unthinkingly, and who is transformed by the helplessness of a baby. He didn't mean to kidnap the baby, but now that he has it, it looks at him with trust and need, and he is powerless before eyes more demanding than his own.

The movie, which just won the Oscar for best foreign film, is set in Soweto, the township outside Johannesburg where neat little houses built by the new government are overwhelmed by square miles of shacks. There is poverty and despair here, but also hope and opportunity; from Soweto have come generations of politicians, entrepreneurs, artists, musicians, as if it were the Lower East Side of South Africa. Tsotsi (Presley Chweneyagae) is not destined to be one of those. We don't even learn his real name until later in the film; "*tsotsi*" means "thug," and that's what he is

He leads a loose-knit gang that smashes and grabs, loots and shoots, sets out each morning to steal something. On a crowded train, they stab a man, - and he dies without anyone noticing; they hold his body up with their own, take his wallet, flee when the doors open. Another day's work. But when his friend Boston (Mothusi Magano) asks Tsotsi how he really feels, whether decency comes into it, he fights with him and walks off into the night, and we sense how alone he is. Later, in a flashback, we will understand the cruelty of the home and father he fled from.

He goes from here to there. He has a strange meeting with a man in a wheelchair, and asks him why he bothers to go on living. The man tells him. Tsotsi finds himself in an upscale suburb. Such areas in Joburg are usually gated communities, each house surrounded by a security wall, every gate promising "armed response." An African professional woman gets out of her Mercedes to ring the buzzer on the gate, so her husband can let her in. Tsotsi shoots her and steals her car. Some time passes before he realizes he has a passenger: a baby boy.

Tsotsi is a killer, but he cannot kill a baby. He takes it home with him, to a room built on top of somebody else's shack. It might be wise for him to leave the baby at a church or an orphanage, but that doesn't occur to him. He has the baby, so the baby is his. We can guess that he will not abandon the boy because he has been abandoned himself, and projects upon the infant all of his own self-pity.

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We realize the violence in the film has slowed. Tsotsi himself is slow to realize he has a new agenda. He uses newspapers as diapers, feeds the baby condensed milk, carries it around with him in a shopping bag. Finally, in desperation, at gunpoint, he forces a nursing mother (Terry Pheto) to feed the child. She lives in a nearby shack, a clean and cheerful one. As he watches her do what he demands, something shifts inside of him, and all of his hurt and grief are awakened.

Tsotsi doesn't become a nice man. He simply stops being active as an evil one, and finds his time occupied with the child. Babies are single-minded. They want to be fed, they want to be changed, they want to be held, they want to be made much of, and they think it is their birthright. Who is Tsotsi to argue?

What a simple and yet profound story this is. It does not sentimentalize poverty or make Tsotsi more colorful or sympathetic than he should be; if he deserves praise, it is not for becoming a good man but for allowing himself to be distracted from the job of being a bad man. The nursing mother, named Miriam, is played by Terry Pheto as a quiet counterpoint to his rage. She lives in Soweto and has seen his kind before. She senses something in him, some pool of feeling he must ignore if he is to remain Tsotsi. She makes reasonable decisions. She acts not as a heroine but as a realist who wants to nudge Tsotsi in a direction that will protect her own family and this helpless baby, and then perhaps even Tsotsi himself. These two performances, by Chweneyagae and Pheto, are surrounded by temptations to overact or cave in to sentimentality; they step safely past them and play the characters as they might actually live their lives.

How the story develops is for you to discover. I was surprised to find that it leads toward hope instead of despair; why does fiction so often assume defeat is our destiny? The film avoids obligatory violence and actually deals with the characters as people. The story is based on a novel by the South African writer Athol Fugard, directed and written by Gavin Hood.

This is the second year in a row (after "Yesterday") that a South African film has been nominated for the foreign film Oscar. There are stories in the beloved country that have cried for a century to be told.

(<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060309/REVIEWS/60308003/1023>)

## 5

### **'Tsotsi': The Broken Heart of South Africa**

By Desson Thomson  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Friday, March 10, 2006; C01

For the 19-year-old man-child they call Tsotsi -- Johannesburg street slang for "thug" -- it has come down to this: He has burst into an apartment, pulled out a gun and forced the woman inside to breast-feed an infant -- the one he's carrying around in a shopping bag.

How this intimidating hoodlum stumbled into this situation is the white-knuckle business of "Tsotsi," the South African film that was named Best Foreign Language Film at last weekend's Oscars. A mixture of thrilling documentary-style realism and Hollywood hokum, "Tsotsi" leaves you all but tasting the orange dust of Joburg's shantytowns and moved by the harrowing journey Tsotsi (Presley Chweneyagae) is forced to take.

He starts that journey as a practically inhuman predator, who mugs people and jacks cars without a trace of conscience. After pocketing the money or unloading

the hot car, he leads his gang into the local *shebeen* (illegal drinking joint), where they listen to *kwaito* music (the Johannesburg equivalent of rap) and plan for the next day's business.

Tsotsi's life takes an unexpected turn, however, when he steals a BMW from an affluent middle-aged woman (Nambitha Mpumlwana). Surprised at her show of resistance, he fires a bullet into her stomach. As he pulls away, he realizes why she fought so hard. There's a 3-month-old baby in the back. In shock, he totals the car. Now he's stuck with a bum car and a living child.

Tsotsi, whose gang recently shivved an old man to death for not handing over his wallet and who then beat up fellow gang member Boston (Mothusi Magano) for giving him grief about it, is suddenly ambushed by softness: an innocent face that reminds him of his lost childhood. He stuffs the baby into a bag and starts running. Which brings us back to the breastfeeding scene.

South African filmmaker Gavin Hood wrote and directed this adaptation of Athol Fugard's novel of the same name. The book, which Fugard (a white South African) wrote in the early 1960s and set in the since-demolished Sophiatown of the 1950s, has been updated to the present, largely for pragmatic reasons: It was cheaper than creating authentic sets of that era. But the modernization adds a deeper resonance by showing that post-apartheid South Africa is perhaps no less oppressive.

Despite apartheid's dissolution in 1991, the film shows how two starkly different worlds of rich and poor continue to exist. And if apartheid is no longer a blight on the land, AIDS has handily taken over. There are few references to the disease in the movie -- a government poster at a train station and flashback revelations of how Tsotsi's parents died -- but enough to convey a sense of hopelessness. Signs of squalor, such as the hovel-like homes and the abandoned drainage pipes that serve as sleeping quarters for children, complete the depressing canvas and show how a monster such as Tsotsi could emerge.

With a story that personalizes street gangsters and their gritty existence, "Tsotsi" is reminiscent of Fernando Meirelles's "City of God," which did the same for thugs in the *favelas* (slums) of Brazil. But unlike Meirelles, Hood softens the unrelenting harshness whenever he can.

This explains, but doesn't necessarily justify, an often-syrupy score that drips over a few too many scenes. There is also the hint of a romantic relationship between Tsotsi and Miriam (Terry Pheto) -- the woman he forces to breast-feed the child -- that seems forced in for mainstream audiences. And Hood seems compelled to put a backlighting glow behind every African actor as if they are God's special children, or those supple farmers of the old Soviet propaganda films, or even Disney's animated woodland creatures.

The faces of actors such as Chweneyagae and Pheto are authentic and powerful in their own right. As *Tsotsi*, for instance, Chweneyagae turns his face into a living battle mask -- curved, molded and sandpapered into smooth ruthlessness. There seems to be nothing human about him, not even his predatory eyes. But as the story unfolds, that mask begins to crack, and his humanity begins to flow through. A transformation like that needs no music or klieg lights.

*Tsotsi* (94 minutes, at Landmark's E Street Cinema) is rated R for violence and profanity; it also contains depictions of animal cruelty. In the South African dialect of Tsotsitaal with English subtitles.

(<http://www.washingtonpost.com>)

## 6

In the street language of Johannesburg, *Tsotsi* means a street thug or gang member - an appropriate moniker for the main character (Presley Chweneyagae) in this brutal, gripping drama. *Tsotsi*'s mean life of thievery and murder is thrown when a carjacking episode leaves him caring for a young baby. Repressed memories of his own wretched childhood surface and watching the realisation of what he's become dawn on him is powerful stuff. Comparisons with [City Of God](#) are not undeserved.

Director Gavin Hood throws up a township filled with breeze blocks and corrugated iron and, although the lens filters are on the heavy side, he paints a real gulf between the gated world of the baby's affluent parents and *Tsotsi*'s polluted, impoverished domain. Saddled with junior but unable to give him up, *Tsotsi* is forced to think about someone else for the first time in his life. So the baby spends long indignant periods hidden in a paper shopping bag as *Tsotsi* ferries him to the young mother (Terry Pheto) he press gangs into wet nursing.

"A CAULDRON OF SIMMERING RAGE"

While the childhood roots of *Tsotsi*'s criminal behaviour are made a little too obvious, Hood infuses his work with such passion it's something that's easily overlooked. Filmed almost entirely in *Tsotsi-Taal*, the street patois spoken in the townships, it thrums to a pulsating soundtrack of bass-heavy kwaito music. Through all this, babyface Chweneyagae skulks with awesome menace, a cauldron of simmering rage and frustration and a performance of real skill, carrying the film effortlessly through to the nail-shredding conclusion.

In Afrikaans and *Tsotsi-Taal* with English subtitles.

([http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/03/06/tsotsi\\_2006\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/03/06/tsotsi_2006_review.shtml))

## 7

Fresh from its win at last week's Oscars, [Gavin Hood's](#) important and vital – if a little heavy-handed – film is an update of Athol Fugard's 1959 novel of the same name. Hood transfers Fugard's story from its setting in Johannesburg's long-extinct township of Sophiatown to another, nameless township on the edge of the modern-day city. Everything and nothing has changed. Fugard's overriding interest was in disaffected black youth and the reasons behind their violent crimes. His curiosity survives the journey across half a century, as does his creaky device of parachuting a baby into the life of a thug and watching his cold heart melt. It's a ripe opportunity for Hood to fuse a sharp social portrait with emotive storytelling. Here, we track Tsotsi (meaning 'thug' in the local Tsotsitaal slang), who's played by first-timer [Presley Chweneyagae](#) and is a hard-faced young man with few ties and fewer scruples. Tsotsi becomes an unwitting surrogate father after stealing a car from the gates of a suburban home before realising that there's a baby asleep on the back-seat. It's a simple device, crude even, to employ an innocent baby to thaw a hard heart but still it's a gimmick that gives Hood much scope to examine some of the more unpalatable realities of life in urban South Africa. It also, crucially, gives his story some hope – a commodity hard to begrudge when Hood refuses to shy away from showing Johannesburg as a frightening place in distinct crisis. Of course what distinguishes Hood's film from the novel is history itself. Since Fugard wrote 'Tsotsi', the policy of apartheid has peaked and crumbled; democratic elections have arrived; and, crucially, the sharp disparity of wealth in South Africa has, at least partly, lost its racial edge. The townships remain, but a new black middle class has emerged. Hood confronts this division head-on. Tsotsi's victims – from a homeless man in a wheelchair to a wealthy suburban couple – are black. It gives his film immediate, difficult relevance. Some of the film's production values are askew, and the shadow of 'City of God' hangs awkwardly over it. It's over-lit, over-filtered and brimming with one too many crane shots. That said, the pace never dips and the music from, among others, South African kwaito star [Zola](#) (who appears in the film) is excellent. 'Tsotsi' belongs in a ripe tradition – once outlawed – of progressive white South African filmmakers such as Oliver Schmitz ('Mapantsula') and Darrell Roodt ('Yesterday') who demand understanding of their country's inequities during and beyond white-rule. Visions of South Africa from within ('Cry, The Beloved Country') and without ('Cry Freedom') are not unusual; but this is surely the first not in the English language to make an impact internationally.

(<http://www.timeout.com/film/newyork/reviews/83430/Tsotsi.html>)

8

**A hardened criminal on the streets of a Johannesburg shanty town suddenly finds himself caring for a baby in this edgy and powerful drama from South Africa**

A crime story with a serious difference, **Tsotsi** is an energetic mix of character study and thriller that catapults its audience straight into an unfamiliar but vividly

realised society. A tale of forgiveness and redemption with a vice-like grip, it explores a dark and violent world where innocence is easily destroyed.

The story revolves around a brutal, near-silent hoodlum (Chweneyagae) who initially is known only as 'Tsotsi' - a South African word meaning 'thug'. Living in a shantytown on the edge of Johannesburg, he regularly leads a gang of criminally-minded misfits in bouts of violence, but will happily turn on his friends given the slightest provocation. With a past he'd rather forget, Tsotsi has almost blanked out his own humanity and doesn't show a moment's pity - until the night when an impromptu opportunity for a car theft presents itself. On the verge of desperation, Tsotsi shoots the female owner of the car and speeds away, only to discover he's also accidentally stolen the three-month-old baby on the car's back seat.

About to abandon the car with the baby inside, Tsotsi suddenly (and initially without explanation) changes his mind, instead taking the baby home with him to the shanty town and hesitantly trying to take care of it. Gradually, memories of his damaged childhood start coming back to him, while he keeps the baby secret from his gang and forces a local mother named Miriam (Pheto) to breastfeed the baby at gunpoint. What he can't avoid, however, is the fact that the police are getting closer in their hunt for the baby, and soon the question becomes can he face the consequences of what he's done. Performed by a cast largely made up of South African stage actors and with most of the dialogue in Tsotsi-Taal (a language that mixes English, Afrikaans and several tribal dialects), it's a compulsively told story that shares some stylistic similarities with **City Of God**, but also forges its own unique path. Above everything else, it's a fierce depiction of a class-stricken world where the potential for violence lurks around every corner, illustrated perfectly by the early sequence on a packed train where Tsotsi's gang robs and stabs a passenger without anyone around them realising. This ever-present violence drives the film, giving it a gritty edge, but the real core of the drama is in the characterisation, and particularly the relationship between Tsotsi and Miriam. Starting as a tense kidnapper-victim equation, it slowly evolves into something more, as Miriam recognises the turmoil going on inside Tsotsi's head and hesitantly tries to help him. It's highly impressive that the director manages to pull this off without sinking into sentimentality, and the performances are perfectly pitched, especially from Chweneyagae who has the tricky job of convincingly turning from a brutal blank slate into a damaged young man.

Tension bubbles away until the climax, where all the plot threads come together in a satisfying manner, and there's no sense of lecturing or inappropriate agendas in the storytelling. Instead, this is a universal and powerful story that's shot in vivid widescreen, and carries a restless sense of energy thanks to the sharp visuals and a pulsating soundtrack of ethnic 'Kwaito' music.

**Verdict: There may be moments of shocking brutality, but this crime drama is also a compelling, well-made and surprisingly touching slice of cinema.**

(<http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.jsp?id=154247&section=review&page=all#reviewnav>)

## 9

Tsotsi is the term for a black urban criminal, a street thug or gang member in the vernacular of black townships in South Africa. Tsotsi is also the name the main character in Gavin Hood's new film has given himself. Played by Presley Chweneyagae, Tsotsi is a young gang member living in a Johannesburg township. The film catches a few significant days in his life. In the beginning we get a glimpse of what his life is like day in, day out, in the townships and when venturing out to the richer parts of Johannesburg to commit crime. The violence at the beginning of the film is sudden, severe and casually committed, mainly by Tsotsi, the leader of a gang of four young men. Even towards his fellow gang members and supposedly friends Tsotsi remains cold. The moment everything changes is when Tsotsi accidentally 'steals' a helpless baby (during a carjack in which he seriously injures the female driver and then drives off with her car, crashing it when he realizes that there is a crying baby in the back). Whilst at first wanting to walk away from the crashed car and crying baby, something in Tsotsi changes and for the first time he shows compassion and responsibility. What then ensues is Tsotsi trying to hide the baby from people in his township while trying to care for it, and then committing the bizarre crime of forcing a young mother in his neighbourhood to breast-feed 'his' baby. The baby, the presence of the young mother and her own baby begin to calm Tsotsi down and he starts confronting his past which he had tried to forget. The more he changes as a person for the better the more the tension in the film rises with the police doing their best to find the missing baby. More than any blockbuster thriller this film will have you on the edge of your seat towards the end. It comes as no surprise that Tsotsi has won numerous awards, including 'Best Foreign Language Film' at the 2006 Oscars last week. Based on a novel by South African playwright Athol Fugard, written by him in the early 1960s and set in the 1950s, the film's story takes place in present day South Africa. Most of the film is in Tsotsitaal, a South African township slang which mixes Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa and more. Beautifully shot in wide screen, the township really comes to life. Most people will probably have never experienced townships before but it almost feels like you are there. And, yes, the film does have some similarities to 'City of God' - but this is even better. What really makes the film is the soundtrack, which fits just perfectly. For the first part there is a thumping, gritty kwaito soundtrack, mainly by Zola who also stars in the movie in a supporting role. Zola, who grew up in a township called Zola, hence his name, is regarded as the 'King of Kwaito' in South Africa and the tracks on the Tsotsi soundtrack include some of the biggest hits of his career. Later in the film, as Tsotsi changes the music changes too, and it becomes much more mellow. Vusi Mahlasela, South Africa's long-standing leading vocalist who also grew up in a township, is featured on six tracks here. His songs are truly beautiful and add to the atmospheric element towards the end of the

film. The immense popularity of the film which will no doubt continue in the UK when it opens on 17 March, will not only have an effect on the South African film industry but also the South African music industry. Just recently, as part of the film's promotion Zola was even a guest on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno on NBC in America - quite an accomplishment for an African musician and hopefully this will have a long-term effect on the African music industry and the general public's interest in African music.

(<http://www.vusimahlasela.com/?id=3&prid=127>)

## 10

To many people 19-year-old Tsotsi (Presley Chweneyagae) is like their worst nightmare. Once a street kid, he has clawed his way up the food chain with a combination of cunning and brutality to become the leader of a small criminal gang. With no ambitions other than survival, he takes what he needs through intimidation and violence. He and his fellows - the jovial Aap (Kenneth Nkosi), the cold-blooded Butcher (Zenzo Ngqobe) and the educated but disillusioned Boston (Mothusi Magano) - spend their evenings robbing train passengers and stealing cars.

Then, alone one rainy night, Tsotsi stumbles upon an easy chance to hijack a BMW. When the owner resists, Tsotsi panics, shoots her, and speeds away. He soon realizes the reason for her resistance - in the back of the car lies a four-month-old infant. He decides to abandon the car and the baby, but something in its cries keeps him from leaving. Impulsively he grabs the child and carries it back to his shack. Little does he realize that this tiny, helpless person has started him a path that will change his life forever.

**Review:** If anyone needs proof that the South African film industry has left behind a long and difficult adolescence and is now blooming into a period of vibrant maturity, then *Tsotsti* is ample evidence of this renaissance. Along with films like *Yesterday*, *A Boy Called Twist* and a host of others, *Tsotsti* has all the hallmarks of a world-class piece of cinema: superb production values, true to life performances, a compelling story and, above all, a complete absence of any cultural cringe. As with many great films *Tsotsti* began as a great story. Adapted from playwright Athol Fugard's only novel, it may on the surface appear to be a run of the mill gangster movie - *Goodfellas* set in the townships. But, while it certainly has all the swagger and style of such movies, it is really a deeply personal story of one young man's fall into evil and his struggle for redemption. This mythic, universal quality is undoubtedly part of what makes the film so

accessible and attractive to the hordes of foreign audiences, from Edinburgh to Toronto, who have showered it with praise. Still, a good story is worthless if badly told, but *Tsotsti* never puts a foot wrong. Director Gavin Hood and cinematographer Lance Gewer have painstakingly crafted each shot of the film, making each scene a marvel of understated beauty and economy. Together with the production and costume designers, Hood has captured Joburg and her townships in a way that is simultaneously gritty and glamorous, real and imaginary. Combined with taut editing and a superb score - part thumping kwaito, part soaring lament - these sumptuous visuals make *Tsotsti* a joy to watch. Happily, the performances match the visuals beat for beat. This is particularly impressive considering they are largely unknown and untried. Presley Chweneyagae gives a bravura performance as the eponymous anti-hero, and his fellow gangsters (including kwaito star Zola) all acquit themselves admirably, but it's newcomer Terry Pheto who steals the show as the gentle Miriam. The wonderful Jerry Mofokeng makes the most of his small but challenging role as a wheelchair bound vagrant, as does Rapulana Seiphemo as the baby's distraught father. In a final touch of brilliance, the filmmakers chose to have the cast speak entirely in South African languages, from the ubiquitous tsotsi-taal to Tswana, Zulu, Afrikaans and Sotho. Not only does this varnish the dialogue with an extra layer of authenticity, it also lends the speaking parts a wonderful texture and rhythm that English just cannot match. There's no doubt that the film's subject matter will be difficult for many South Africans to deal with. Most of us have been affected by violent crime, either directly or indirectly, and the idea of a film that glamourizes this underworld would be totally repugnant to its many victims. But *Tsotsti* is, in essence, a powerful refutation of that awful world, not a celebration of it. It is a fable that repeats a very old lesson - that no man is damned who seeks redemption. It puts a human face on the shadowy demon that the criminal has become in our collective consciousness, and shows that he too can love, can hope, can seek forgiveness. It would be a great pity if *Tsotsti* were ignored by local audiences. Foreign viewers can enjoy the luster and richness of a story well told, but it will never be more than an exotic curiosity to them. For South Africans the film has a more powerful resonance as a microcosm of the challenges faced by our fragile democracy. It is a tale of hope and of redemption through the elemental human rights of decency, dignity and life. Don't miss it.

([http://www.channel24.co.za/entertainment/movies/?p=Reviews\\_Article&i=111065](http://www.channel24.co.za/entertainment/movies/?p=Reviews_Article&i=111065))

In a shantytown of Soweto Township on the edges of Johannesburg, South Africa, Tsotsi (Presley Chweneyagae) lives and breathes by the fear he instills in others. Tsotsi, literally translated meaning "thug" in his South African ghetto dialect, is a 19-year-old who was orphaned at an early age. He has repressed memories of this painful childhood to the point that he cannot remember even his own birth name...he is, by all accounts, a thug with no regard for human life.

"Tsotsi," the film, cries out with passionate regard for human life in this emotionally raw, compelling story of hope, redemption, respect and the search for humanity when all of life is utterly inhumane. Writer/director Gavin Hood's "Tsotsi" is based upon a novel by award-winning writer Athol Fugard. Hood has changed Fugard's 50's setting and placed "Tsotsi" in contemporary South Africa, revealing an even more powerful and politically revealing portrait of the heartbreakingly painful realities of life in modern day South Africa.

As played by Chweneyagae, Tsotsi has grown into a young man who practically screams out his lifetime of social and emotional neglect. Chweneyagae, a newcomer to feature films, is mesmerizing from his first moments onscreen and hypnotic even with sharing the screen with a young infant.

Tsotsi leads a young group of seemingly wannabe gangsters who feed his rage. There is Boston (Mothusi Mogano), an intellectual whose alcohol-driven failings can't hide his essential decency despite his inability to ever sit for the teaching license exam for which he qualifies. There's the ever loyal Aap (Kenneth Nkosi), whose longtime companionship with Tsotsi is done as much out of fear as anything. Finally, there is Butcher (Zenzo Ngqobe), a young man who most mirrors Tsotsi with his unquenchable thirst for violence. Together, these young men spend their days stealing, harassing, assault and, yes, even killing to satisfy their impulses and their seemingly beyond control emotional needs.

We are introduced to these young men as they find an easy mark in a public train station in Johannesburg. They follow this elderly man onto the train and, even surrounded by a crowded train car, are able to rob and tragically assault the man. It is quick...it is without histrionics...it is ever so brief. It is, however, deeply and painfully revealing.

"Tsotsi" has been compared to Fernando Meirelles' "City of God," a critically praised portrayal of street life in Brazil that carries many similar themes. The film, in reality, often plays like a cross between that film, last year's remarkable "Hotel Rwanda" and, oddly enough, the even more remarkable "Shawshank Redemption."

After these young men so brazenly attack the elderly man on the train, they are gathered a local shebeen (illegal liquor bar). Boston, whose violent inner reaction to the vicious assault has led to harassment by his "posse," is harassing Tsotsi

himself with questions about decency, humanity, his past and, even more basically, demanding to know his real name. As the questions become more persistent and intense, you can feel the rage and despair boiling up in Tsotsi, who clearly has no concept of how to deal with such feelings. In a violent rage, Tsotsi viciously beats Boston and flees to the hills outside South Africa in a pouring rain.

It is here where the story of "Tsotsi" shifts focus. The young man sees yet another easy mark. He eyes a young, middle-class woman struggling to enter her gated home due to a faulty remote control opener. She steps out of the car to call her husband on the intercom. While out, Tsotsi draws his weapon and begins stealing her car. She fights him viciously and, again, Tsotsi shoots her without hesitation not realizing the purpose for her fevered resistance.

The "purpose," however, reveals itself only a few miles down the road as Tsotsi hears the gentle cries of a 3-month-old infant in the back seat. He instantly wrecks the car, tries to strip it and tries, in vain, to abandon the infant in the car. He simply cannot do it. Suddenly, he is able to remember his own abandonment. He simply cannot abandon this young child, perhaps the first human being who Tsotsi cannot question has never wronged him.

Hood's script does not sugarcoat Tsotsi. It does not attempt to instantly remake him into a deeply compassionate human being or even one remotely versed in the act of parenting. His initial interactions with the young infant are frightening in their potential for harm to the child. Even when he is trying desperately to make the right choice for this young child, Tsotsi inevitably makes the wrong choice. One scene, in particular, will be disturbing to the viewer as the baby is nearly irreparably harmed by Tsotsi's own ignorance.

Yet, all of these scenes feel deeply authentic. When one begins a healing journey, any healing journey, it is not an overnight change or an instantly manifested healing. A child who is physically or sexually abused, for example, doesn't simply learn overnight how to communicate, be intimate, experience healthy relationships or, even more simply, love without hurting or being hurt. It is a process, a journey of mistakes and mishaps. Tsotsi's journey is a journey of remembering his own childhood devastation and, slowly, realizing its impact on the decisions he has made in his life.

Realizing that he cannot adequately even feed the child, he eyes Miriam (Terry Pheto) at a well. She is carrying her own young infant. He follows her and, at gunpoint, forces her to nurse this young infant under his care. Over time, it is this practically unspoken relationship that will open Tsotsi's eyes to his own failings and his own responsibilities and accountability.

"Tsotsi" is, towards the end, a film of little moments that connect in grand ways. With his "posse", Tsotsi returns to the home where he stole the car and,

unknowingly, the child. Masked behind the bravado of a simple robbery, Tsotsi merely wants to steal the baby's things. When the simple robbery becomes one of violence, Tsotsi stops Butcher from killing the man he knows is the baby's father. It is a scene both reveals his growing humanity and the violent impulse he still cannot control.

There's no sugarcoated ending in "Tsotsi." The ending is one of sadness, resignation and glimpses of hope. Hood's script doesn't forget the ethics of being human. Tsotsi, the young man, has been transformed by the act of giving and receiving unconditional love, but he is a young man whose actions will require consequences. Hood's ability to direct these scenes in such a way to reveal the transformation into humanity along with the inevitable consequences to follow is filmmaking at its absolute finest.

In a just world, Chweneyagae would have been a nominee for Best Actor for his performance as Tsotsi. It, most certainly, is among the finest performances of 2005. Chweneyagae's Tsotsi is a young man of rage and fear and pain and mesmerizing beauty. Quite simply, it is a magnificent performance.

Yet, every performance here is stellar and rings of truth, most notably the quiet and dignified performance of Pheto as the widowed mother along with the performances of Tsotsi's posse. Hood wisely utilizes South African kwaito music (hip-hop) in balancing the often intense, desperate tone with an undertone of energy and hope. The film, actually shot in Soweto Township and Johannesburg, features camera work that is gritty and revealing of the truth of life in South Africa. We see the shantytowns and steel barrels in which people often live. They are designed sets, yes, yet they are also everyday life for many South Africans.

"Tsotsi" captured the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. It was released in time to qualify for the Academy Awards, but is just now going into a slightly wider release. It is one of only a handful of films where I have, quite literally, forgotten that it is a foreign film. I found myself completely surrendered to the characters and the actions onscreen that language barriers have become irrelevant.

So often, film-makers get it wrong when creating films centering around violence. They make the films about the violence itself. Thus, these films often become nothing more than stylized reproductions of vicious acts. Gavin Hood's "Tsotsi," however, transcends this style of film-making and ends up becoming the ultimate thriller. "Tsotsi" is a film that looks graphically behind the eyes of violence and ultimately discovers the wounded heart of humanity.

(<http://theindependentcritic.com/tsotsi>)

It's so great to finally see a major feature film that shows Africa from an African perspective, as opposed to through the prism of Western eyes. Another recent well-deserved Oscar winner (Best foreign language film) I just had to have in my collection; this is a violent and uncompromising look at life in a Soweto township. Presley Chweneyagae plays the lead, a Johannesburg small-time gangster whose nickname Tsotsi means "thug". I read somewhere that Presley was discovered playing Hamlet in a Soweto theatre group. He's a find in a million, as his performance is mesmerising.

Tsotsi finds a baby in the back of a car he's just jacked off a suburban black woman as the woman waited for the security gates outside her home to open. He doesn't do the expected and simply dump the baby at the side of the road - surprisingly, he decides to take it home and care for it. He hasn't a clue how to care for a child of course and he turns to a local woman who makes decorative mobiles from glass. She's a nursing mother herself, and - under the threat of death, mind you - Tsotsi gets her to look after the child while he goes back out there to do his thing.

It's an interesting study of how complex life is for people who don't have much and while the movie doesn't make excuses or descend into sentimentality at any point, it's engaging to gradually see the heart of the man called Tsotsi - a man who at first glance seemed utterly heartless - emerge for all to see. It's a great story, based on the novel by South African playwright Athol Fugard, and the final scenes had me (literally) on the edge of my seat the first time I watched it. Gavin Hood makes good use of Johannesburg's urban setting and the natural beauty of South Africa. I strongly recommend this movie. For anyone who might not know and who may have an interest, this is an authentic slice of African life.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Tsotsi-Presley-Chweneyagae/dp/B000FC2FX8>)