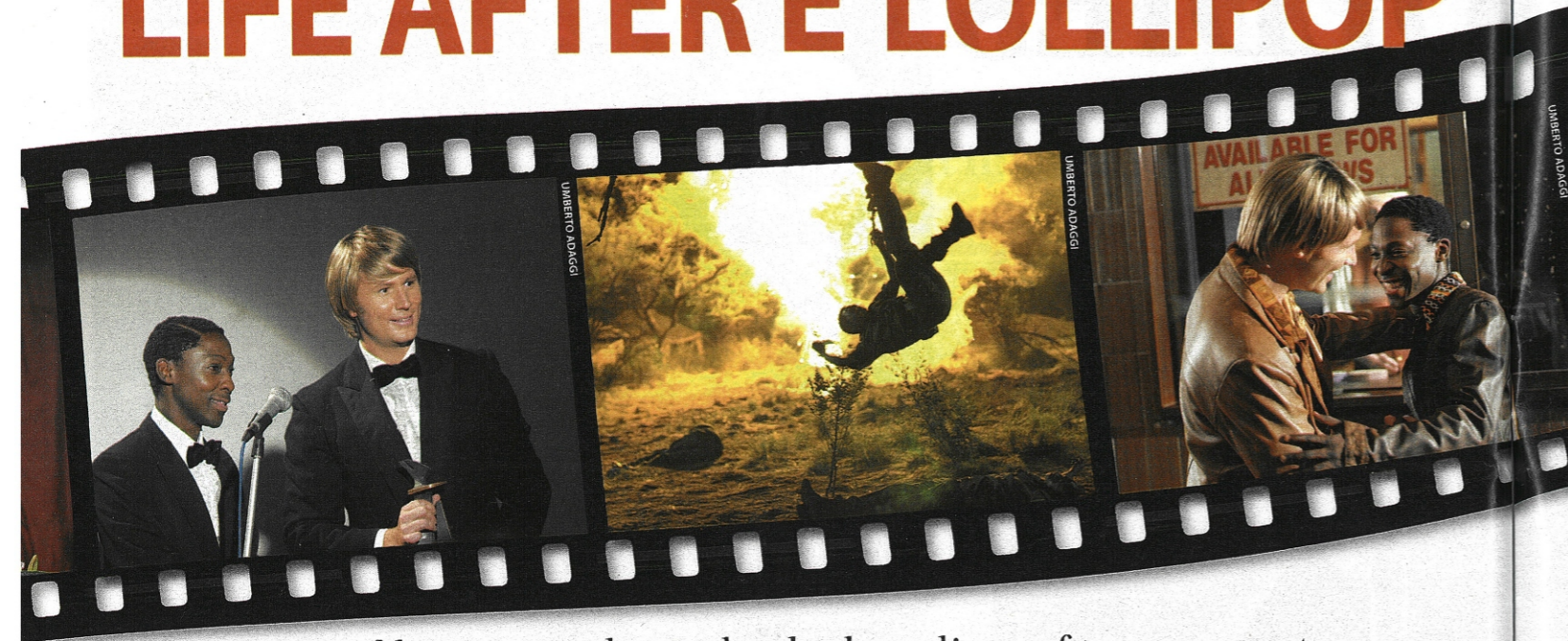


LIFE AFTER E'LOLLIPOP



A new film creatively tracks the later lives of two youngsters who starred in a hit 1970's SA movie

By Jared Orlin

IT HAS all the elements of a blockbuster action movie: wild booze and cocaine binges, explosions, gunfire, car theft and jail time. The edge-of-your-seat action was Muntu Ndebele's life until eight years ago – and it's this dramatic journey that is the subject of a movie in the making.

Sound confusing? Here is what's going on. Back in the 1970s South Africans were entranced by e'Lollipop, a heart-warming film about a friendship between a black boy and a white boy in apartheid SA. It broke box-office records at the time and became a local classic.

The two child stars, Muntu Ndebele and Norman Knox, became heroes as well as real-life friends but as they grew up against a backdrop of turbulence and upheaval their lives went in very different directions.

Muntu fell from grace and was sucked into a life of crime and excess. Money dried up – so did offers to star in movies – and he turned to crime and drugs.

Then 10 years ago André Pieterse, producer of e'Lollipop, decided to look for Muntu after

the rights to the original film reverted to his production company, Ma-Afrika Films. It took two years to track down Muntu and he resisted a meeting until his sister, Lindi, persuaded him to see André. It was an emotional meeting. He had hit rock bottom and wasted away to a mere 43 kg.

André was determined to do right by Muntu and encouraged him to start writing the story of everything he'd been through in the 20-something years since e'Lollipop was released. The process was the best therapy Muntu could get and he's been clean for eight years.

On the other hand Norman, a businessman, had left SA to start a new life in Sweden with his wife, Helena.

Now their story will be recounted on the big screen in *A Million Colours*, a movie described by Canadian director Peter Bishai as a "love story filled with adventure, action, intrigue, star-crossed lovers, redemption and courage".

Creative licence has been used in the movie: Norman is the one who finds Muntu and sets him back on the right track and a chaotic scene in an Anglo-

lan minefield did not happen in real life.

The story sounds like a winner – and the two stars of the show, Wandile Molebatsi, the former Soul City and Rhythm City actor as Muntu, and Idols winner Jason Hartman in his debut big-screen role as Norman, are thrilled to be part of it.

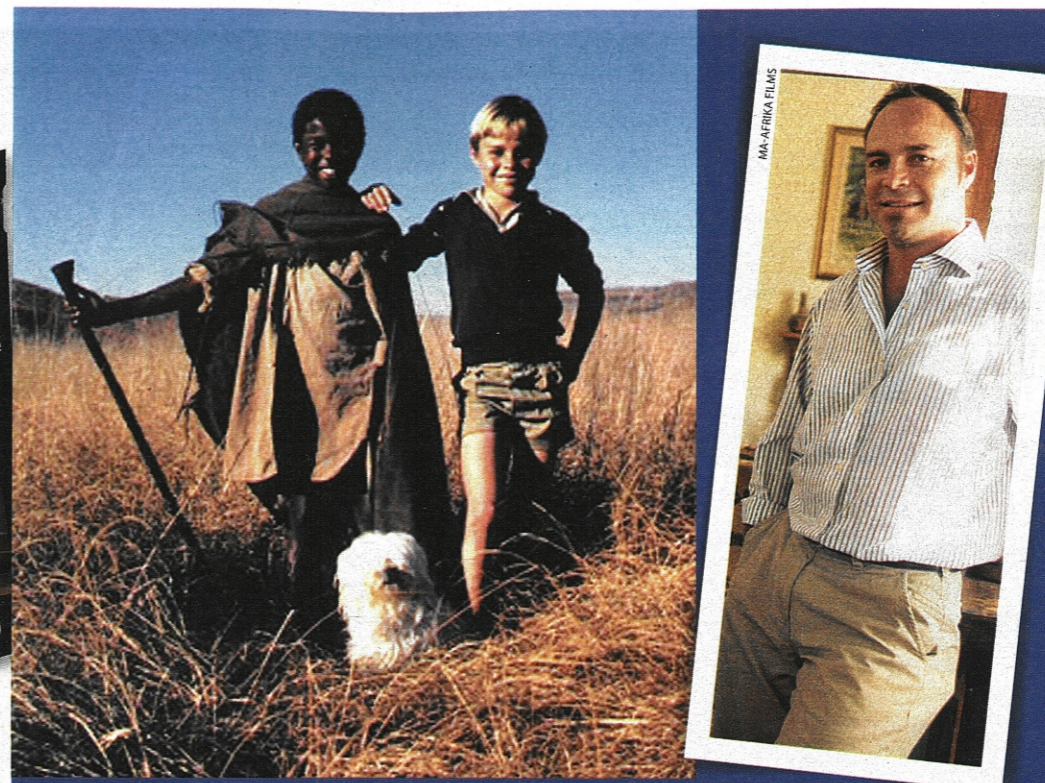
ON A damp, slightly gloomy Friday YOU arrives on the film set. Dozens of cars line Fox and Loveday streets outside the exclusive Rand Club in downtown

Joburg and the main dining room is lit up like a Christmas tree. Round tables are surrounded by glamorous people, extras in the scene in which Muntu and Norman accept an award for their roles in e'Lollipop.

There's a hush as Peter – who co-wrote the screenplay with e'Lollipop producer Andre Pieterse – yells "action!" and the cameras roll. Suddenly a giant spotlight flashes onto Wandile and Jason and the extras begin their thunderous applause... it's like watching a little slice of



ABOVE: Wandile (left) with the real Muntu on the film set. Muntu is an associate producer on the movie and has spent hours with Wandile, filling him in on the details of his eventful life.



LEFT: Scenes from the upcoming e'Lollipop sequel, *A Million Colours*, starring Soul City actor Wandile Molebatsi as Muntu Ndebele and Idols' Jason Hartman as Norman Knox.

ABOVE: A young Muntu and Norman as they appeared in the original film. ABOVE RIGHT: Norman as an adult. He now lives in Sweden.

Hollywood in the middle of Jozi.

In a break between scenes we grab the two stars for a chat. Wandile (26) is an old hand at this game. He has been acting since he was 12 and is having a blast in the role, his most physical to date.

"I'm doing my own stunts," he says proudly. He was even prepared to tackle a dangerous scene in which he hangs upside down with a rope tied to one leg. In the scene, which was shot near Hartebeestpoort Dam and made to resemble an Angolan MK camp, Muntu cuts the rope with a machete and runs through a field as bombs explode around him.

Producers tried to persuade Wandile to let a professional stuntman do the scene but he insisted he was up to the challenge. "I was so arrogant. I was like, 'Of course I can do it,'" he says with a chuckle.

The scene was choreographed down to the smallest movement and Wandile had to weave through the mass of explosions. But things went wrong when the fall winded him and he felt woozy from hanging upside-down for so long. The compli-

cated scene had to be reshot from scratch, including resetting the 12 explosives, which took more than an hour.

"But I nailed it the second time," Wandile says. "It was terrifying running through those explosions. I was really running for my life."

Another highlight of the 42-day shoot, which wraps up later this month, was hanging out with Muntu, who was 14 when he starred in e'Lollipop.

"He took me to his mom's house, showed me the places where he stole cars and spoke about his addiction to crack cocaine," Wandile says. "I could see it was difficult for him to talk about it but as an actor it was invaluable to be able to tap into that."

Playing best friends with Jason Hartman is a breeze, he adds. They have plenty in common because Wandile is also a musician – his R&B band, Uju, will release their debut album, *Free*, this month. "We clicked immediately," he says.

Jason (30) agrees. "We discovered we're signed to the same record company too," he says.

The Idols star plays a supporting role to Wandile's Muntu and

he's happy with that. "I love acting," he says. "I definitely want to do more films."

To play Norman over the years Jason sports various looks. His head is all but shaved to play army-guy Norman (which fiancée Candice Phippen found "pretty sexy", he tells us) and dons a '70s-style hairpiece for the older Norman, which he's wearing today.

He says starring in *A Million Colours* is "a real honour". "I grew up in the area where the original e'Lollipop was made [the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands] and my best friend was black. It's almost surreal to be part of the film's resurgence."

His only regret is he has yet to meet the real Norman, who is still in Sweden.

NORMAN's presence might be missed on set but Muntu – who turns 50 this year but jokes he still feels 18 – is more than making up for that. He has signed on as an associate producer and is on set almost every day, advising, writing a diary and sharing his thoughts about scenes as well as memories they bring up.

"Hopefully the story will be

made into a book when the movie is out," he says.

When he's not on set he's a motivational speaker and enjoys spending time with his wife, Wendy.

He never lost hope, even when he was in jail, Muntu says, adding that e'Lollipop's message of friendship against all odds was an inspiration in his recovery. He's still in touch with Norman, he says, his face lighting up at the mention of his childhood friend.

"We usually speak about two or three times a month but now the movie is being filmed we chat about twice a week. I let him know what's going on. I still call him my *mfwethu* (brother). In fact I sent him an SMS a few minutes ago."

Friends for life then? Oh yes, says Muntu, smiling. He wouldn't have it any other way. And when the movie comes out – hopefully at next year's Cannes Film Festival – the world will know their stories. □

THE MOVIE BY NUMBERS

- *A Million Colours* is being shot six days a week, 12 hours a day.
- 700 extras were used to replicate the 16 June 1976 student riots.
- The movie has 50 speaking parts and a main cast of 12 actors.
- 100 people make up the crew.

- There are 50 locations in the movie, including several places in Thembisa, the Hector Pieterse Memorial in Soweto, a KwaZulu-Natal village and various places in Joburg.
- There are 193 scenes in the movie, which is planned to run for two hours.
- The script took eight months to write (three major drafts and about a dozen lesser tweaks).