

# FILM REVIEW

**Jerome Pikwane, dir. *The Tokoloshe*.** 2018. 92 minutes. English and isiZulu, with English subtitles. South Africa. Indigenous Film Distribution. No price reported.

Time is “out of joint” in Jerome Pikwane’s feature debut, *The Tokoloshe* (2018). A psychological thriller that incorporates elements of paranormal horror, *The Tokoloshe* is temporally fragmented by unnervingly inscrutable flashbacks and a disconcerting contemporaneity of the past with the present. The timeframe is not explained, and the film visually blurs the past and the present in its styling, creating a somewhat disorienting sense of melancholic timelessness. This collapse of temporal boundaries is fitting, given that the titular character, Tokoloshe, is a supernatural creature that exists in the liminal time of monsterhood—beyond the linearity of “knowable” historic time. In the gripping opening sequence which sets the gloomy tone and establishes the creature’s predatory nature, a voice-over narration explains, “He is as old as mankind. Long before he came to our cities, he waited in dark forests and deep rivers for the lost and the weak. Cursed by the great fathers, he is as hateful as he is foul. He is the Tokoloshe, one that feeds on children and those left behind.” Thus, the film’s mythology eschews the popular understanding of Tokoloshes in Zulu folklore, in which these small but malevolent witches’ familiars are sent to terrorize real or imagined enemies in the night. Instead, the film provincially casts Tokoloshe as a predator who exclusively preys on vulnerable and defenseless children. This departure from tradition, coupled with the liminal timescape, ultimately enhances the film’s overall thematic disruption of linear progress concerning the protagonist’s psychological growth and her attempts to maintain order and stability through repression.

*The Tokoloshe* follows Busi, a desperate young woman who escapes her abusive homelife in the village only to fall prey to other monsters in Johannesburg. She subsequently finds employment as a cleaner at a derelict children’s hospital in order to save enough money to bring her younger sister from their village home to the city. Busi tellingly works the graveyard shift and is frequently pictured in poorly lit corridors and the grim underbelly of the hospital’s waste disposal, where a spectral trickster attempts to lure her to her death. Her corrupt employer routinely makes sexual advances toward

her and even attempts to rape her at one point. In fact, the threat of sexual violation assumes a prominent position at this eerily empty hospital that is predominately populated by creepy male staff.

Busi's sparsely furnished apartment in an old, condemned building provides little refuge, as it underscores her loneliness. Its red walls and the feeling of imprisonment that the film invokes is deliciously reminiscent of the red room in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Here, Busi is haunted by nightmarish flashbacks that suggest a traumatic past of childhood neglect, incest, and illegal abortions. Indeed, it appears that the film is an artful exploration of what Cathy Caruth describes as the "wound of the mind" in her definition of trauma: "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" caused by an event that "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (*Unclaimed Experience* [Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996]). This unassimilated trauma is cleverly illustrated, not only by Busi's inability to express herself, her child-like mode of dress, and intrusive nightmares, but also by the multiple settings which reflect Busi's state of mind. In addition to the labyrinthine hospital and uncanny apartment, Busi's home in the village conjures up the specter of poverty and unhomeliness in its decayed exterior. Its isolation from the wider community makes it the prime hunting ground for her pedophilic father. As such, the rural is figured as a space of terror and neglect, in contrast to the idyllic pastoral scenes of the popular imagination. Both the rural and the urban are stripped of their enabling mythologies and presented as spaces of entrapment and unspeakable violence.

While she works at the hospital, Busi meets and befriends Gracie, a little girl who is both tormented and possessed by the Tokoloshe. Although the Tokoloshe is mostly concealed throughout the film—glimpsed only suggestively in rapid blurred shots—Gracie is visibly traumatized, and the scars on her body attest to the monster's malevolence, while also underscoring her fragility. Recognizing this vulnerability, and also perhaps as an attempt to heal her own wound of having had an absent mother, Busi takes Gracie under her wing and becomes her surrogate mother. Significantly, Gracie is an uncanny double; she mirrors Busi in her trauma and appearance (they wear the same hairstyle and color scheme, spotting red nightgowns at the film's climax). An argument can be made that she is, in fact, the wounded inner child whom Busi must come to terms with and embrace in order to lay the ghosts of her past to rest. Nevertheless, their bond represents for Busi the companionship that she desperately desires, as foreshadowed by her numerous unsuccessful efforts to reach her sister in earlier scenes. This antidote to her loneliness is summarily shattered when the Tokoloshe follows Gracie to Busi's apartment and continues to wreak havoc on their lives, however. It is only when Busi, with Gracie's support, is able to return to the originary site of her trauma that she can hope to exorcise the creature and start the healing process. In the end, it appears that the Tokoloshe is more a device used to portray the horrors of sexual assault or the ever-present threat of rape for

South African women and girls than a tangible presence—although the film underwhelmingly literalizes the creature so that Busi may concretely defeat it.

To describe *The Tokoloshe* as a visually compelling, slow-paced depiction of arrested development and psychological unravelling that draws on gothic atmospheres, settings, and tropes to create suspense and unease is an understatement. The cinematography is exceptional, as is the film's articulation of the themes of precarity and interrupted girlhood, (the pervasive threat of) rape and its impact on the psyche of the victim, the incessant return of the repressed, and the inability to move on without addressing one's past traumas. Where it falls short, however, lies in the mechanics of its storytelling; the Zulu dialogue is clunky, the film withholds too much information in the service of building mystery and suspense—relying perhaps too heavily on the reader to detangle the hidden meanings—and the resolution is inconclusive. Despite the fact that she eventually confronts her trauma, it is ultimately unclear whether Busi emerges as the victor or villain.

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