



# TONIGHT

## WHAT'S COLOUR GOT TO DO WITH IT?

In today's PC world it's easy to forget the absurdities of apartheid rules, or the way they still influence how we regard each other writes

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**F**OREGROUNDING love across the racial divide is still a sticky subject for film-makers, no matter where the story plays out. Put it in South Africa, against an apartheid background, and you're really moving into difficult territory.

No wonder then that *Skin* needed some outside help to get off the ground.

It is a film about Sandra Laing, a coloured child born to white parents at the height of apartheid. Though she was biologically their child, she was a genetic throwback to an earlier generation.

The film was shot in late 2007, mostly in and around Johannesburg by American-born director Anthony Fabian and a cast of mostly locals, headed by British actress Sophie Okonedo and Kiwi Sam Neill.

It is the first to be completed under the UK/SA film co-production treaty with the filming completed in SA and the post-production done in the UK.

The award-winning film has been picking up accolades on the international film festival circuit, hitting the mark with audiences and winning seven awards at film festivals to date.

It has finally been picked up for local distribution in October.

Fabian (who now lives in the UK) first became aware of the story of Sandra Laing when he heard her being interviewed on BBC Radio4 in July 2000, the year she was reunited with her mother after 27 years of separation.

"It's an incredibly compelling story. Like everyone I was fascinated by the oddness of the situation. A black child, born to white parents ... but more than that, the dynamics between this child and her parents was complex and moving," said Fabian, who was in South Africa for a lightning visit last week.

He accompanied a (UK) Sunday Times Magazine team and a (UK-based) Channel 4 team who are shooting a documentary about Laing.

He was initially moved by the human drama within the story. "Then, as I began to understand the story and its implications I thought it was actually telling the history of South Africa over the last 30 years," he said.

Fabian spent many years



**WE ARE FAMILY:** Mom Sannie (Alice Krige), daughter Sandra (Ella Ramangwane) and dad Abraham (Sam Neill).

doing research and developing a relationship with Laing and in that time completed *Township Stories* (a documentary about the then Dimpho Di Kopano company's road to performing *uCarmen eKhayelitsha* in London) among other projects.

He and Laing retraced her footsteps and he went through an extensive workshop period to make sure the film wouldn't end up being an outsider's perspective on South African culture.

He cast Okonedo to play Laing for very specific reasons. At the time of filming she'd just been nominated for an Oscar for *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), which made her very bankable by Hollywood standards, and she was familiar with South Africa because of that film.

"Having been brought up black in a white community her experience was actually closer to Sandra's, whereas the experience of a coloured actress here is that they have a community that they belong to.

"Yes, they didn't feel well-treated by the black or white community, but they had a community.

"It's a story of identity and

Sandra was unique. She didn't belong to her own family.

"That was something that Sophie understood well."

Fabian was cagey about the film's budget but said it was low by Hollywood standards, but high by local standards, and he bemoaned the lack of financial support from South Africa. "Quite frankly, if the IDC or NFVF had said 'we will fund you if you cast only South Africans' I would've done it. Like everyone else, they want the security of an international star."

That said, he did manage to get some money out of the NFVF: "It was hard won."

He said the film has now won seven prizes on the international film festival circuit and believes that success should create a knock-on perception in this country.

"It often takes a success from outside to take something homegrown seriously," said Fabian.

*Skin* will premiere at the Durban International Film Festival (July 22 to August 2) and scheduled to release on the local circuit in October.



Sophie Okonedo plays grown up Sandra in *Skin*.