



Shirley Adams

Directed by [Oliver Hermanus](#)
[The Global Film Initiative](#)

Interlacing themes of poverty and perseverance in the Cape Flats area of post-Apartheid South Africa, Oliver Hermanus explores the relationship between a mother, Shirley, and her quadriplegic son, Donovan, as he slips into depression after having been shot in his neighbourhood.

Having given up her job to care for her son, and having been abandoned by her husband, Shirley struggles to support Donovan's mental and physical well-being and at the same time take care of herself. Due to high medical bills, she is forced to rely on the help of her neighbours and the meagre money her errant husband leaves her sporadically in the mailbox. Caught between coping after being abandoned by her husband, dealing with the police who are trying to capture the person responsible for the shooting, and consoling Donovan as he struggles to come to terms with his permanent disability, Shirley's life is both overwhelming and erratic.

Shirley, played by well-known South African actress, Denise Newman, is strong and resilient in her efforts to support Donovan, going so far as to steal, doing whatever she believes necessary to protect her son. She is also a very proud woman, and is reluctant to accept any help, including shunning the help of a white personal support worker named Tamsin (Emily Child), interpreting her service as charity. She does, however, swallow her pride and later accepts Tamsin's help.

Donovan (Keenan Arrison) is for the most part quiet throughout the film, though not without effect, seeming to live almost entirely in his head. Keenan does a fantastic job of portraying the deep anguish a young person feels when their life is irrevocably changed by an incident out of their control. The relationship between himself and his mother is both touching and stifling. Few words are exchanged between them but the tension in their relationship is very palpable when they're in the same room. Anguish and pain, fear and desperation are etched in their movements, making this a very absorbing film.

Hermanus' use of close-up camera shots, particularly on Shirley, gives this film the stifling, erratic and intimate feeling, making the audience feel what the character feels. This, I felt, was the most important element of *Shirley Adams*. Furthermore, the lighting chosen by Hermanus, particularly in the scenes shared by Shirley and Donovan, is sombre and dark, well chosen to contribute to the overall effect of the film. The themes of poverty, struggle and perseverance were effectively communicated throughout. Shirley and Donovan live in a poor neighbourhood in Cape Town, an area designated by the Apartheid government as being for "Coloured" people only. The conditions for the people living in the Cape Flats have not changed much since the official end of Apartheid

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and the daily lives of "Coloured" people in this area continue to be a struggle. Hermanus' film is raw and socially relevant because it depicts the circumstances of the reality that many face.

Hermanus does a wonderful job highlighting the sacrifices one makes in the role of a mother, especially a single mother. Although Shirley's life is changed completely, her sacrifice for her son and the strength she shows despite insurmountable challenges is something worth taking away from this film.

Written by: [Toni Francis](#), October 3rd 2010

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