



Shirley Adams

By Ken Eisner

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Starring Denise Newman. Unrated. Plays Friday to Sunday, June 18 to 20, Tuesday, June 22, and Thursday, June 24, at the Vancity Theatre

A working-class “coloured” woman at the wrong end of Cape Town loses everything but finds something like herself in *Shirley Adams*, a moderately compelling drama from today’s South Africa.



Watch the trailer for *Shirley Adams*.

Showing as part of the Vancouver International Film Centre’s Global Lens series, and as a kind of coda to the magisterial documentary [Have You Heard From Johannesburg](#), this is a writing-and-directing debut for young Oliver Hermanus. In fact, he came up with the basic story at 15 and treated the finished effort as a film-school graduation project. This is apparent around the edges. The stately performance by Denise Newman, as the title character, broke and caring for a paraplegic son (Keenan Arrison), gives the film enough gravity to overcome its amateurish elements.

Most annoying of these, courtesy of cinematographer Jamie Ramsay (who worked on [District 9](#)), are the many shots of the back of Shirley’s head. This, plus the camera’s propensity to peek around corners and from behind obscuring columns, yields results more precious than illuminating. And Hermanus depends on his actors—mostly nonprofessionals—to convey emotions almost entirely through pained pauses and grim expressions rather than words.

That said, the cast comes through effectively, particularly in the quiet by-play between Newman and Arrison, as a teenager who’s deeply depressed after being left paralyzed by a random, gang-related shooting. Theresa Sedras is also fine as a sympathetic Muslim neighbour who picks up some slack

after Shirley's husband has deserted the family and our hard-bitten heroine has had to quit her hospital job. It's more difficult to read Emily Child's turn as a young social worker who's in over her head.

Still, the film takes you places you probably haven't seen before, and the director is someone to keep an eye on in the future.

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