

## Shirley's gift one of love

By Zane Henry

"I would laugh when people at premieres would ask Oliver: 'Where'd you find a mother who can act?'" Denise Newman smiles.

"After the first couple of times, I made sure I dressed up as glamorously as possible so people would know I was actually an actress."

It's a funny story, but completely understandable in light of Newman's knockout performance as the title character in Shirley Adams, the debut feature from the young South African director Oliver Hermanus.

She plays a mother who spends her days taking care of her son in their Mitchells Plain home. Donovan (Keenan Arrison) was shot in the back of the neck while walking home from school and was subsequently paralysed.

The film is an intensely emotional document driven by Newman's incandescent performance. It debuted at last year's Durban International Film Festival (Diff) and has been selected to screen at the San Francisco Film Festival (US), the Off Camera Film Festival in Poland, the Rotterdam International Film Festival (Holland), the Amiens International Film Festival (AIFF) (France), the London International Film Festival (UK), the Rio Film Festival (Brazil), the Toronto International Film Festival (Canada) and the Locarno International Film Festival (Switzerland).

Awards include Best South African Film, Best Actress, Best First Feature Film at DIFF; Best Actress, Best Director and Best Film at the South African Film and Television Awards (Saftas); Best Actress and Best Editing at the Dubai Film Festival; the Grand Prix and Prix Signis at the AIFF; and a Special Jury Prize for Best Actress at the Ekwa Film Festival in Reunion.

Newman was immediately excited about the project after reading the script.

"There are times when you read a script and it immediately resonates with you," she says. "There was nothing extraneous about it. It's this contained story with a very deep well of emotion. Most of it is seen through the mother's eyes. Most films relegate mothers to support roles for nubile 20-something stars. She's the one who drives the story. I thought, what a challenge. What a gift.

"When I first met Oliver I was immediately struck by his confidence," Newman says.

"He is aware of his abilities and his talent without being arrogant. It's the same energy that he brought on to the set. He knew exactly how he wanted to tell this story that he's been working on for a long time. I just had to trust him. And he made it easy for me to trust him.

"We watched other films as references and he spoke about the style that he wanted to use, but it's fundamentally his vision.

His style of film-making was unlike anything Newman has done before.

"Everything was hand-held and there are no cuts. The camera is roving about constantly and you could be in the shot at any time so you have to stay embedded in the story at all times.

"I always knew that it was going to be a hard film to make just by virtue of the subject matter. It's thrilling for any actor to be part of a creative process that keeps you on the edge of your seat. Oliver was always there for us though. He is an extremely talented young man. He can give me a call at any time and I'll drop what I'm doing to work with him again.

"Shirley Adams was a gift."



Published on the web by Tonight on August 13, 2010.