SEBATA: THE BEAST (2025, South Africa, 81 min.), written and directed by Norman Maake; cinematography by Jiten Ramlal; edited by Tongai Furusa; music by Seoli Mashaba; with Sello Sebotsane (Detective Mzi), Lilitha Mzizi (Detective Kgoro), Mirriam "Mimi" Mamabolo (Morongwa), Mfanuhona Sithole (Philemon), Prisca Motswatswa (Morongwa's Albino Daughter), Ndumiso Zenzile (Commander Molautsi), Nkosinathi Keswa (Dr. Banda), Zanele Mbatha (Witch), Tshepang Makhene (Young Kgoro). In English with English subtitles.

Sebata *was inspired by the need to create a cinematic film that delves into the Muti murder crimes plaguing African communities. As a filmmaker, I wanted to explore why so many of these cases remain unsolved. What excited me was crafting a fictional story that could tackle these difficult themes while still entertaining the audience. I was drawn to the idea of making a film that speaks directly and honestly to African audiences without using African spirituality as a mere cinematic trope to frame the brutality and horrors of these stories.*

--Norman Maake

The film opens with production titles backed by an ominous soundtrack. We then see a group of kids playing hide-and-seek in a rural setting beside a river. The boy who is "it" has his eyes closed and is counting when the soundtrack lets us know that something is amiss. We hear a growl. Coming out of the water is presumably some unseen horror that has everyone terrified, especially the boy whose eyes are now wide open. He runs to his mother, who sends him to safety and stands petrified to await the coming of the terror.

We then cut to a young man waking from a dream—presumably from what we have just witnessed, but we can't be sure. And for the remainder of the film we will continue to move back and forth, from "reality" to dream, from hallucination to "reality," from distant memory

to present moment, unsure of what is "real" and what is not, with discomfort and confusion ever ready to explode into terror and horror.

We cut to a police station, where the station chief, Commander Molautsi, and middle-aged Detective Mzi are poring over some gruesome crime photos. We then cut back to the young man, who we see is himself headed to the police station, outside of which he encounters a street preacher manically exhorting passers-by to understand that demons are real, are controlling their actions, and they must be cast out. True healing, he screams, will not come in hospitals. We then cut to a hospital, where a man whom we will come to know as Philemon is kneeling despondent beside his wife, Palesa, who is afflicted by some sort of illness.

With that, a voice-over narration begins, which will continue as we see Philemon take his wife out of the hospital in a wheelchair. On the street, we see traditional dancers in weird, exotic costumes approaching and almost attacking the camera as the voice-over continues:

Once upon a time in a land far far away, it is said a wicked, wicked Witch learned of the power of the Water Spirit. With her power, she summoned the creature from the dead into the land of the living. It is believed that the Beast possessed powers far greater than what humans could ever imagine. The power to heal those in the deepest shadow of death. But there would be a price to pay…

With that, we cut to a close-up of a woman in white, presumably a witch (an *izangoma or abathakathi*), grotesquely dancing, laughing, and chanting a phrase that we will come to hear several times over the course of the film (and whose meaning we will only understand near the end)—*Genada la ma za, Irama, Onagasara*.

We are then back in the "real" world with the young man, Detective Kgoro, at the police station. Kgoro will serve as our point of reference in this film, as we follow him through nearly every scene, increasingly as the film goes on. A proper modern detective, using his education and his reason to find answers and solve crimes, he has been sent to this region to get on top of a series of horrible murders that are either the work of a serial killer (as he assumes) or the product of ritual killings connected to witchcraft and the supposed use of demonic forces. Kgoro and Mzi will increasingly come to believe that they are dealing with the latter, with what are known as "muti murders."

Muti murders, also known as medicine murders or ritual killings, are crimes where victims are murdered and mutilated to harvest body parts for use in traditional medicines, often believed to bring power, success, or protection. The practice involves killing to create

"muti" (medicine). Often, its perpetrators claim to be using demonic beasts to do the actual killing. (See the section below on Tokoloshe for more on that.)

Both detectives are committed to stopping this practice and locking up whoever is engaging in it. Kgoro's approach is no-nonsense, even reckless, with little respect for the psychological power of these traditional beliefs. Unlike his young partner, Mzi is not willing to dismiss the inherent power of traditional belief. His own granddaughter may have been the victim of a ritual kidnapping, and he worries about unleashing forces that he doesn't understand. At the same time, he cannot stop Kgoro from rushing blindly into situations that he too doesn't understand, even though he also may have some history with the psychological terrors that are in play.

Their investigations lead them to the mysterious traditional healer, "Dr. Banda," and his entourage. It leads them to the sympathetic spiritual medium, Morongwa, and her albino daughter. It leads them to the former detective De Kok, who has been driven mad by his pursuit of Muti murderers. It leads them to Philemon, the man with the suffering wife.

And it eventually leads them to an understanding of the meaning of the demonic chant and the motivation of those who seek this form of healing:

Rise, rise from death. Take your place amongst the gods.
For death is just a dream of a soul lost in the dark.
What once was dead will rise to life.

However, by then it will be clear that we are indeed dealing with forces that are well beyond the rational abilities of our young protagonist.

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ABOUT THE TOKOLOSHE

The Tokoloshe, or Tikolohe as it is sometimes spelled, is said to have emerged as a creature created by witches, known in Zulu as izangoma *or* abathakathi, *to serve as agents of mischief or malevolence. Its size, often described as diminutive and dwarf-like, is deceptive. Though small, it carries the power to disrupt lives, harm children, and torment adults. In some traditions, the Tokoloshe is invisible, slipping unseen through homes at night, while in others it appears as a grotesque humanoid with lumpy skin, sharp claws, and glowing eyes. It is a being born of human fear, imagination, and the desire to explain misfortune in a world where illness, death, and sudden tragedy were common and often mysterious. . . .*

. . . Anthropologists and historians note that in many African cultures, small spirits like the Tokoloshe serve a dual purpose: they act as warnings and enforcers. Parents tell children of the Tokoloshe to encourage obedience, and villagers speak of it to explain unexplained deaths, illnesses, or calamities. The Tokoloshe thus becomes a figure both feared and respected—a supernatural force that exists to maintain balance and remind humans of the limits of their understanding.

The creature's connection to witchcraft is central to its identity. Traditional belief holds that a witch can summon a Tokoloshe to harass an enemy or protect a sacred space. Some stories suggest the the Tokoloshe can be sent to attack someone when they sleep, causing illness or even death. It is said that the Tokoloshe can cross walls, slip under doors, and hide in dark corners, making it impossible to escape. In this way, the Tokoloshe embodies the unseen power of witchcraft itself: subtle, unpredictable, and deeply feared.

Across different regions, the Tokoloshe takes on slightly different forms and functions. In some Xhosa stories, it is a trickster spirit, playing mischievous pranks on humans—hiding objects, making noises at night, or moving furniture. In Zulu tales, it is often darker, associated with curses, death, and malevolent magic. In all cases, however, the Tokoloshe exists at the boundary between the natural and supernatural, a reminder that the world contains forces beyond human control.

(From Matthew Holt, *The Legend of the Tokoloshe*, 2025)

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ABOUT NORMAN MAAKE

Born in 1979 and raised in Johannesburg, where he still lives, Norman Maake studied filmmaking at AFDA, the African School of Film and Dramatic Arts, created by the new post-Apartheid government in 1994. He showed his potential right away. While still in school, he made the short film, *Home Sweet Home* (1999), which took second place at the 2001 Transparency International Festival. *Leffing Bofelong Ba Lesedi* (1999) won him Best Director at the 22000 Avanti Festival, and began working on the screenplay for film that would become *Soldiers of the Rock*.

Soldiers of the Rock (2003) was his first feature film. Set in the difficult, dangerous world of South African diamond mining, it has particularly strong visuals, made with remarkable assurance for such a young filmmaker. It won a number of film festival awards, including Best Screenplay and Best Upcoming Director at the 2003 Pan-African Film Festival and the Mario Van Peebles award in 2004. Norman was our guest here in Portland at CFAF 2005, where he dazzled our audience with his charm, cinematic knowledge, and strong personal story.

Though he had had success as a director of TV commercials, he told us at the time that he had decided to focus exclusively on feature films and dramatic television series, and that he did. His three-part TV mini-series for the South African Broadcasting Company, *Homecoming*, tells the story of political exiles who return to South Africa following its liberation; it was recut and released as a feature film in 2005. It was followed in 2007 by the six-part mini-series *Entabeni* (a modern rendition of *Macbeth*, like this year's *Katanga* from Burkina Faso), *Unsung Hero* (2010), about Mike Masote, founder of the Soweto String Quartet, and *Skeem Saam* (2011), a thirteen-part series about a group of rural adolescents.

He is now focused on making feature films in a variety of genres. In 2019 he released another feature film, *Love Lives Here,* a romantic comedy about a successful, hard-working woman in pursuit of a husband. *Piet's Sake* (2021) is a comedy about a white employer who swaps places with a black employee. *Abafana Ababi* (2022) is a crime thriller focused on two friends who see themselves as modern Robin Hoods. *Piet's Sake 2* (2023) is another identity-swapping comedy of errors. *Inkabi: The Hitman* (2024) is a thriller about a former contract killer who tries to start over again as a taxi driver but finds himself drawn into trouble when he tries to save a young woman who witnesses a murder.

Love Lives Here, *Piet's Sake* and *Piet's Sake 2*, and *Abafana Ababi* are all available on Amazon Prime. *Inkabi* is available on Netflix.

Sebata (2025) is his first foray into the horror/thriller genre.

For an interview with Norman made at the time of the making of *Sebata*, check out this interview with Rolland Simpi Motaung on *GQ South Africa*:

https://gq.co.za/culture/entertainment/2025-03-10-norman-maake-to-thrill-with-new-film-sebata-the-beast-at-the-joburg-film-festival/

--Notes by Michael Dembrow
Cascade Festival of African Films
Africanfilmfestival.org