

PRODUCTION NOTES *HUMAN CARGO*

Every exile makes his own map.

- *Derek Walcott, Nobel Prize for Literature, 1992*

The richness of Canada is based on the gifts of immigrants: labour, culture, knowledge, dedication. But Canada's doors are closing. Once welcomed into our vibrant society, many refugees are now marginalized; some are criminalized.

Struck by the international community's culpability in the genocide of Rwanda, Linda Svendsen and Brian McKeown began their research into refugee stories six years ago.

They took their examination of refugees from war-torn African countries to Susan Morgan, CBC's Creative Head of TV Arts and Entertainment. What they had was a two-hour special. Morgan wanted more. She wanted to step behind the doors of immigrants and refugees. But she wanted to do so on a large canvas - a six-hour miniseries. And, Morgan had another important suggestion – shoot part of the story where it starts - on location in Africa.

Svendsen and McKeown attended refugee hearings, met with Immigration Refugee Board Members and Hearing Officers as well as refugee lawyers. They consulted immigrant service and settlement workers; read documents from Amnesty International, Lawyers for Human Rights, United Nations High Commission for Refugees. It was time to bring all of this together. In a rented boardroom on Vancouver's West Broadway, the writers placed six pieces of paper of their writing table - one sheet for each hour. Everything that happened in an hour went on its designated page. They constructed six interweaving stories about six strong characters, each of whom carries an ongoing story line.

"Linda and I believe that Canadian refugee hearings are profoundly dramatic. The claimant's case turns on something very primitive, very profound," McKeown said. "One person faces another and a judgment is made. Clear and simple or tainted with prejudice, presumption and misunderstanding. Either way, a life depends on that judgment."

The characters in *Human Cargo* are the conservative member of the refugee board, Nina Wade (Kate Nelligan); a driven refugee lawyer, Jerry Fischer (Nicholas Campbell); Moses Buntu (Bayo Akinfemi), a refugee fleeing Burundi's civil war; Nina's daughter Helen, an aid-worker (Cara Pifko); Naila, an Afghan refugee (Myriam Acharki) and Moses' sister Odette Kaba (Ntathi Moshesh), who is caught in the civil war with her three children. The six-hour series was shot in Canada and South Africa, features 125 speaking parts and over three thousand extras.

The main characters intersect, but the heart of the story is Moses Buntu, a Hutu schoolteacher, torn from his village and family, imprisoned and tortured. He escapes and embarks on a journey from hell to get to Canada. Moses carries with him a story that threatens to shake the power elite.

“The most humbling thing for me was to see how our material, material written for people from other cultures resonated with the actors,” said McKeown “Our cast members brought history and experiences to the script. They made our material real.”

“I think that every human being is, to some extent, a refugee,” Svendsen commented. “We have all, at some level, experienced exclusion. That’s what I wanted to explore.”

The Filmmakers

The two-hour drama had become an intricate six-hour miniseries with more than 125 speaking parts, scenes calling for three thousand extras and locations in Vancouver and South Africa.

As McKeown puts it “Our scope had become very broad and the shoot was now enormously intricate. We needed help.”

Hugh Beard and Debra Beard of Force Four Entertainment Inc. were the perfect partners. McKeown and Hugh Beard had both produced and executive-produced the legendary *The Beachcombers* and both companies were developing long-form television dramas – Force Four Entertainment with *Jinnah on Crime* and Howe Sound Films with *Frostfire*, filmed above the Arctic Circle.

“*Human Cargo* is a sweeping series with entwining stories,” said Hugh. “For most of us refugees and ethnic killings are little more than news headlines. This series takes current world events and brings them right into our living rooms with human faces, human voices.

“The logistical challenge fascinated me. In Africa we would need a cast of a thousands. Where would we find them? How would we set up the refugee camp? What about transportation? Lunch? ”

Producer Debra Beard has a special interest in casting. “We went international to find the right people. As well as Vancouver and Toronto, we auditioned London, Cape Town and Johannesburg. One of main characters is from Nigeria; one is from Morocco.” And then there is serendipity. Toronto based Bayo Akinfemi, who plays the key role of Moses Buntu, simply sent his audition tape, by mail to the producers’ office. “He came in to do the interrogation scene and we all knew that we had found the emotional centre of the series.”

For the producers, there was only one director, Brad Turner – a multiple Gemini Award nominee who has directed some of television’s best-known series, miniseries and specials, including episodes of the international success *Da Vinci’s Inquest*, the critically acclaimed miniseries, *Major Crime* and the must-see *24*. Calling *Human Cargo* the best script he’d ever read, Turner jumped on board immediately. “From the minute I read the first draft, I had to be involved in this project. It is a complex weave of characters and points of view,” Turner said. “I hope that we can contribute to a deeper understanding of the plight of many Africans.”

The Actors

Top of everybody's list for the role of conservative politician Nina Wade was Genie and Gemini award-winning actress Kate Nelligan.

"We had no Plan B to cast this part," says McKeown. "We sent her the script and happily she agreed. It's a difficult role. Nina will be seen by some as racist and others as a champion. She must be taken beyond these limiting labels. And Kate certainly did that."

"I was very interested in the character's broad scope," Nelligan explained. "Nina has conservative views on immigration but I wanted to make sure she was not stereotyped as stupid and evil. She's much more interesting than that. Also, conservatives have sex. So, she is human!"

For director Brad Turner, the role of Jerry Fischer belonged to Nicholas Campbell. Turner has worked with Campbell on the international success *Da Vinci's Inquest* and the critically acclaimed four-hour miniseries *Major Crime*.

For Campbell the story was a revelation. "*Human Cargo* opened my eyes," he said. "Nearly everybody you meet came to this country as an immigrant. My mother was a refugee. But the world has become a much darker place. There are a lot more people desperate to get here and it's becoming much more difficult."

Campbell's family knows the plight of refugees. The actor's mother-in-law was expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin in the seventies. She entered Canada as a refugee. The ring and bracelet Campbell wears in *Human Cargo* are gifts which his mother-in-law offered him after returning from a recent trip to her native country.

Someone who knows, first-hand, how difficult it can be to get into Canada is Bayo Akinfemi who plays the pivotal role of Burundian¹ refugee Moses Buntu. After having been refused sponsored entry from Nigeria into Canada, Akinfemi first came to this country carrying false papers and making a refugee claim. The desire and determination to become a Canadian, the fear of detention and deportation – these are feelings Akinfemi has lived and which echo through his performance.

"When I read the script I had this incredible feeling that somebody knew a little bit about my life," Akinfemi said. "It is extraordinary to be able to show viewers what many in Africa go through and dramatize what they endure to come to Canada, their aspirations for a better life in this country."

Kate Nelligan called his a "magnificent, magnificent presence."

"We were blessed with Bayo," said director Brad Turner. "He brought a humility to the character that isn't possible to perform. It comes deep within him. It is Bayo's strength and dignity expressed through the character of Moses that is pivotal to the series."

¹ **Burundi**

Suffered a brutal ten-year ethnic war between Hutus and Tutsis that claimed more than 200,000 lives, mostly civilians. Tutsi paratroopers assassinated the nation's first democratically elected president, a Hutu, in October 1993. In 1998, Burundian forces joined those of Rwanda and Uganda against Congo and Hutu exiles.

Much of Cara Pifko's storyline (she plays Nina Wade's daughter Helen) takes place in Africa. "Our characters struggle with the problems facing any mother/daughter with two opposing world views. Wanting to make a difference, Helen escapes to an NGO to work in Africa. The young actress explained, "I was startled by the beauty of the country and the rich culture of its people." The production had a lasting effect on Pifko. Since returning from the shoot, she joined Amnesty International and hosted the 2003 anti-war theatre event The Lysistrata Project in Toronto.

For the role of Naila, the enigmatic Afghan refugee, the producers were determined to find an actress with a knowledge and respect for Islam and a working understanding of the West. They found Myriam Acharki in London. Myriam is a second generation Moroccan Arab, born and raised in Belgium, with major film and television credits in the U.K.

"The biggest challenge was to make Naila real and recognizable," Acharki said. "Arabic women are rarely portrayed on film and television. I wanted to show her pride and her intelligence. But she's also a very broken character. She's seen too much before getting to Canada and then, in Canada, her life just gets worse."

The last of the six characters that make up the critical threads of *Human Cargo* is Odette Kaba, Moses' sister. In a host of moving stories, hers is perhaps the most tragic. Separated from her husband, she is trying to feed and save her three young children as they, along with thousands of other displaced people, are driven from their homes.

The role went to award-winning South African actress Nthathi Moshesh. In the scenes of thousands of refugees straggling along the dusty roads of Africa, it is Odette's face we pick out, her story we follow. "Odette's story is that of every mother who has lost her child to violence or her loved ones to immigration," Moshesh explained. "I became an actor to tell stories and this is the most powerful story I've ever told."

Filming in Africa

The scenes shot in Africa provide the series much of its power and authenticity.

Brian McKeown went to Kenya to research the refugee process. In Nairobi, his cab edged through a throng of about 200 milling around the gates of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) office.² The desperate people came from countries that border Kenya – Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea. They came seeking official refugee status or to apply for asylum. Forced to push and shove his way 20 feet from the cab to the gate, McKeown was pulled through the gates which then clanged shut against the crowd.

"I witnessed the hearing of a music student from Addis Ababa who fled arrest, interrogation and torture, following an army crackdown on his campus," McKeown explained. "He had been waiting outside the UNHCR for four days. He hadn't eaten in six. I was deeply shaken." This young man's story was only one of the many McKeown and Svendsen heard and encompassed in their script.

² The UNHCR estimates that, as of January, 2003, there were 4,593,199 Africans and well over 20 million people of concern world-wide who come under their mandate.

Foreign shoots are always complex – different languages, cultures and currencies. But *Human Cargo* faced particular challenges. Filmmakers had to create the destruction of a town, the mass exodus of thousands of people, a refugee camp, riots, military attacks.

The school room, airport and refugee camp scenes were filmed over six days in Port St. Johns, 1600 kilometers and a two-day truck drive from Cape Town. To recruit the 2,000 extras – older men and women and young children - the crew approached the four chiefs in the area asking for 500 people from each group. “It was quite extraordinary,” says Production Executive Dianne Beatty of the South African company Abracadabra. “Many of these people did not have a telephone and had never seen a movie. On our first day in Port St. John, one of the stunt men, Isaac Mavanbela, carefully told the story of *Human Cargo* in Xhosa, the language of the people. For every scene, he would once again tell the story with emphasis on the work at hand. As a mark of affection and respect for the storyteller, the cast began calling him ‘daddy’.”

But wasn't it difficult for people who have known turmoil and violence to re-create such scenes for the camera? “The people acted with love and care. They took great pride in helping to describe the grief of Africa to a wider audience,” Beatty explained. “Nelson Mandela has taught all of us in South Africa that, while we have known dark times, we can now be light whether we are man or woman, black or white. The people of Port St. Johns understood *Human Cargo* and saw it as an opportunity to help their brothers in the north of this continent by exposing what is still evil.”

For Brad Turner, one of the most moving experiences took place in Cape Town during the filming of the mining labour camp. “About one hundred extras had just been put behind a chain link fence. They were captured. Their future was slavery. The men lined up, interlacing their fingers through the fence. On faces of these young black men, I saw the stories of their fathers or grandfathers. I saw the story of apartheid. The audience needed to see that,” Turner explained. “We built a 250 foot dolly track for the camera scanned the line. There was total silence, behind and in front on the camera. It was a stunning, stunning moment – and totally unplanned.”

As to the Hugh Beard's questions: water, literally by the truckload, was available at the location. Sixteen buses set off for the Port St. Johns location at 4:00 am for six consecutive mornings, carrying the day's extras to the set. Breakfast was served on board.

“*Human Cargo* has been the shoot of a lifetime,” McKeown asserted. “Full of moments none of us will ever forget. We had been working on a particularly intense scene between Kate Nelligan and Cara Pifko, when Kate captured our feelings perfectly.”

“This work, this day, this thing we are making,” Nelligan confided quietly. “This is why I got into the business in the first place.”

Human Cargo, November 2003