

# Synopsis

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**A film about language, literature and humanity. Iconic Shakespeare monologues performed in 10 South African languages – revealing the enduring power and relevance of the insights into humanity of one of the giants of world literature. A high-water mark in the history of Shakespeare in South Africa, and a unique contribution to the global body of filmed performances of his work in translation.**

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Iconic Shakespeare soliloquies and other monologues come alive in powerful performances in the languages of one of the world's most multilingual countries. Brilliant performances in 10 South African languages, subtitled in English, are combined with observations by the translators and actors on the minds and thinking of these characters – revealing that Shakespeare's acutely observed insights into humanity remain as relevant to us today, as pertinent to our lives and our world, as they were four hundred years ago.

*Speak Me A Speech* is not only a film in 11 languages – it is also a film about language. It is through language, still humanity's defining invention and our preeminent tool for navigating the complexities of life, that the Shakespearean characters that are the film's protagonists attempt to make sense of their interior and exterior worlds: from adolescent infatuation and love triangles to the travails of married life, the inhumanity of xenophobia, political strains and social strife, prejudice and ambition, conscience and madness, transience, death, and much else besides. In language and an acting style that are consistently conversational, colloquial and natural, the performers in the film engage with subject matter that is pressing, real and now.

The film is, therefore, also about the power of great literature: its enduring ability to enrich our lives and deepen our understanding, to guide our thinking and our actions, to instil an empathetic perspective on the inner lives of others – and to remind us that in our deepest fears, hopes and desires we are not alone.

*Speak Me A Speech* is, ultimately, about our humanity. It is a feature-length film that contains the world, encompassing the fundamentals of the human experience. The film rests on four pillars: Shakespeare's texts, extraordinary performances, animated and insightful discussions, and cinematic images of the contemporary world, the struggling and dysfunctional modern society in which the actors are speaking these ancient thoughts, and in which this film is made.

The request to 'speak me a speech' – lifted from Hamlet's words to the lead actor in the group of players arriving at court – translates here as: give me the language to help me make sense of my world, and my life in

it. This is the timeless appeal to which the film is a modern-day, 21st-century response.

Project undertaken in partnership with the Tsikinya-Chaka Centre, School of Literature, Language and Media, Wits University, Johannesburg. Producers: Chris Thurman, Professor of English, Wits University; Founding Director: Tsikinya-Chaka Centre, leading work on translations of Shakespeare into South African languages; President: Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa; Editor: Shakespeare in Southern Africa; Victor van Aswegen, CEO: CineSouth Studios.

Film produced with web platform as a parallel resource: [speak-me-a-speech.com](http://speak-me-a-speech.com) will contain clips of all filmed monologues, performed in South African languages with user-selectable options of subtitles in either Shakespeare's English, contemporary English, or the spoken language, with texts.

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Poetic documentary

105 minutes

South Africa

English, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Xitsonga, siSwati, Tshivenda, isiNdebele

Ultra HD 4K 3840 x 2160

16:9 aspect ratio

Director: Victor van Aswegen

In production

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## Director's note

Multiple layers of richness – to me, the defining characteristic of the film we are making, and the project's standout feature.

First, and most obviously, there is Shakespeare. For the breadth and depth of his depiction of human nature, the man, as they say, needs no introduction. And so I won't. Except to briefly mention in connection with this richest of layers some of the thinking that drove the choices in our meticulous process over many months of text selection. We were applying a number of criteria: whether a monologue would work on a stand-alone basis, brutally lifted out of its context of the full-length play, whether it had a clear line-by-line logic or train of thought the character was articulating that an audience could follow, an identifiable succession of story beats, or a thinking-out-loud working through complexity and uncertainty to arrive at a decided course of action, a strong and satisfying ending.

But these were merely the minimum requirements. The focus was on subject matter. And the question was whether the concerns a character is grappling with, cares about so intensely, and expresses so eloquently, would resonate with our modern-day audience. Would our audience get it? Would they identify? Would they care? Simply put, the test was: would it land? Does it work – goosebumps-work?

We were unflinching in the application of this test, with sometimes surprising results. Bemoaning the whips and scorns of time? Certainly no problem for our contemporary audiences to identify with that. But a few famous lines down in the same soliloquy, the dread of something after death as the key factor staying one's hand in its fatal reach for the bare bodkin? This side of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, maybe not so much. Some monologues almost too well known (but renewed in our translations) did ringingly make the cut; so did many that are relatively obscure, likely to be new to most in our audiences, making for a satisfying mix of the familiar and the fresh.

What we ended up with is an astonishing parade of characters, with a balance between the genders, spanning ages, motivations, circumstances, psychologies. And a remarkable collection of monologues ranging over the kaleidoscope of human experience, emotions and concerns: adolescent love to social justice; murderous resolve to merciful forgiveness; derangement; racist prejudice; flirtation and silliness; evil and madness; loss of joy in life; old-age wretchedness. All of which – coming dangerously close as this listing does to embarking on an introduction of a man in no need of being introduced – is to say: the man is in our movie, and his extraordinary thinking is its first astoundingly rich layer.

Second – the languages. This, uniquely, is a film in which all 10 of South Africa's major non-English languages are spoken. The country's rich

multilingualism shines through in the variety ranging from the predominant isiZulu, isiXhosa and Afrikaans to languages such as Tshivenda and isiNdebele that are spoken by far smaller numbers of people and comparatively rarely heard on stage or in film. The result is a linguistic soundscape that reflects the country and is in itself, particularly to those audiences not surrounded by it in everyday life, exotic and colourful, addictively beautiful even, and a pleasure to listen to, with its rhythms and inflections, its clicks and gutturals.

And yes – the film does contain a lot of English as well, apart from the subtitles, in the lengthy sections in which the performers reflect on the characters they are portraying, their thinking, motivations and actions, and on aspects of the translations and adaptations.

Third, and closely related to the range of languages: all the reimaginings of Shakespeare's characters in vastly different cultural contexts. This is superbly exemplified by our very first shoot on the project, with the brilliant Anelisa Phewa performing his own translation into isiZulu, and adaptation to a Zulu cultural context, of Sir Thomas More's forceful speech making the case for the strangers, against the noise of the xenophobic mob. Half a millennium after the historical incident in England recounted in the play, four hundred years after Shakespeare came up with those words, and half a world away from that vanished old London, Anelisa gives us these events and thoughts in a strikingly different culture and setting – and yet, and yet: the same humanity, the same conflicts, the same concerns, considerations and counterpoints. There is a strong sense – and this characterises the entire film – of disparate worlds coming together. Multiple fresh nuances and variations on the familiar being highlighted fascinatingly, yes. But mainly, underlying all variety of history, culture, language and place, hard unvarying human fundamentals being laid bare – movingly, pitch-perfectly, enlighteningly.

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Fourth: our huge cast and the impressive array of talents every one of them brings to the creative endeavour not only of infusing Shakespeare's characters and thoughts with life, but doing so in their home languages. This layer of the film is rich with the deep experience and wells of personal and professional insight accumulated by each member of the cast over decades of life and work on stage, in television and in film.

Finally, there is the B-roll, which feels like an undeserved misnomer when these images of the place so cinematically embed the characters in the contemporary world, visually situating them in the floundering young democracy that is South Africa. With failing institutions, rolling blackouts,

rising discontent, and straining under the legacies of its troubled past and the stark realities of its fraught present, distressingly dysfunctional, it is also alluringly beautiful – a wealth of beauty, colour and variety, in its cityscapes and landscapes, street scenes and people, its light and land, all its vibrant human life, artfully, cinematically captured and included in the film.

Layer upon layer of extraordinary richness.

All of it, along with the bespoke soundtrack composed for the film, constructed into a satisfying arc and woven into a feature-length film that surpasses – let's be honest – the bounds of what is normally understood under the term documentary.

Our essential irony is that as we invent cleverer machines, reshape the globe, deploy ever more cataclysmically destructive weapons, look deeper into space, understand better, travel further, we find ourselves simply more and more starkly face to face with ourselves. The further we go, the more intense is the encounter with human nature, more dramatic, more inescapable, more consequential. The more we advance, the larger we loom ourselves, and the more we are thrown back to the old puzzles. What is human nature? How do we deal with each other? How do we construct a self and a life? How do we cope with the demands?

The grappling with these ur-questions is the subject matter of the film. And that is the point of having these speeches spoken to one, again, and now in this manner.

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“I heard thee speak me a speech once,” says Hamlet to the lead actor in the troupe arriving at court. What exactly is he after when he asks for a repeat performance of words familiar to him from an unpopular play heard before in another setting? The satisfaction of a re-encounter with a work he says he and others judged much more positively than popular opinion did? Certainly. The simple pleasure of seeing a good theatrical performance, and hearing this particular speech he says he “chiefly loved”? Of course. Some relief, through fiction and play, from life in notoriously gloomy Elsinore? Understandably. Perhaps a fresh assessment of acting skills that he can put to use – who knows?

But what he gets from having the speech spoken to him again, now, in this context, under these circumstances, at this point in his life, is something else entirely.

This time, what he takes from the experience is nothing less than shattering self-reflection.

Victor van Aswegen