



*Love Stories.* First Run/Icarus Films.

Reviewed by Robert Vassen

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### The Ordinary Made Extraordinary

A couple meets and falls in love. Pretty ordinary stuff that happens every day all over the world, so why all the fuss? Place these ordinary people in South Africa in the time of apartheid and their lives become extraordinary. The first two stories deal with love across the color line. To maintain the racial purity of the white South Africans, the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act made it illegal for whites to marry or cohabit with non-whites. The "Love Stories" series is produced by Harriet Gavshon, a film-maker known for her "Ordinary People Programmes" that reflect facets of life of the people and the country of South Africa, and David Jammy. The first video, *White Girl In Search of the Party*, which is the title of Pauline Podbrey's book, tells the story of Pauline who arrives in South Africa from Lithuania, and at the age of sixteen sets out to find and join the Communist Party. She meets a young Indian South African, H. A. Naidoo, a trade unionist and a Communist Party leader. In 1950 they leave Durban, their hometown, for Cape Town where they believe a more tolerant and liberal atmosphere prevails. In that year, the Suppression of Communism Act is passed, to which the two fall victim along with further restrictions. In spite of not being able to go out together, they are happy, but realize they will have to leave the country if they wish to remain together. With their young daughters they go first to Great Britain and then on to Hungary, where the British Communist Party finds work for them. Pauline remarks that this was seen as an ideal way in which they could dedicate themselves to the working people. However, H. A. becomes totally disillusioned with the party and leaves, vowing never to rejoin. They go back to England where

he dies, a broken man, in 1970. The story is told by Pauline, now back in South Africa, with the help of two of her daughters, Karen and Jenny. Three veterans of the struggle, Fred and Sarah Carneson and Wolfie Kodesh, add their weight to the telling of the story. Fred Carneson aptly sums up this period as the "lunatic days" of apartheid. The second story, *Bubbles and Me* is set in the 1970s. The "me" in the title is Jackie Luthuli. A daughter, now a grown woman, she tells the story of her mother (Bubbles), while searching for her own answers: why did her mother abandon her and how did she really die? "Bubbles" Mpondo, a beautiful newly qualified nurse, leaves her mundane world of Port Elizabeth in search of fame as a model. In Johannesburg she meets Jannie Beetge, a white middle-class Afrikaner. He falls madly in love with her and the two openly defy the laws that forbid black/white couples. They are caught, charged with contravening the Immorality Act and are given suspended sentences. Bubbles becomes restless, and with her sights on Europe, tells Jannie she is leaving him. Their bodies are found soon after. Did Jannie kill her and then take his own life? Were special agents involved? Did Jannie's family take matters into their own hands? Both these documentaries explore the complex nature of love in a society which determined, through its many laws, who could fall in love and who could not. The third documentary, *The Moon in My Pocket*, is a love story different from the other two, but by no means less poignant. Wilton Mkwai, a senior member of the ANC and one of the 156 charged in the Treason Trial of 1956, was sentenced to life imprisonment in December 1964. He is set on marrying

his “sweetheart,” but it will take over twenty years for the apartheid regime to finally give permission for them to marry. The documentary is told through beautifully written letters by Mkwai and Irene Khumalo, and interviews by Mac Maharaj and Tokyo Sexwale, both former Robben Island prisoners; Mkwai’s lawyer; Ramesh Vassen and his family; and family and friends of Ms. Khumalo. It is, above all, a story of perseverance, hope, courage, and never-erring faith. As Mkwai remarks towards the end, “I never lose hope.” When after two decades they are allowed to marry but then separate again after the cere-

mony, the bride will live only for another six months before succumbing to cancer. <p> What makes this series important is that it reminds us of how racist attitudes and laws can destroy people and create abnormal societies. It should also remind us that while we celebrate the “miracle” of the peaceful transition from the “old apartheid South Africa” to the “new South Africa,” we must remember the pain, suffering, humiliation, and degradation that so many citizens of South Africa suffered, and the very high price paid for freedom. <p>

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