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## South Africa and its peacemakers main inspiration for documentary

*Bruce Fessier*  
*The Desert Sun*

Michael Henry Wilson came up through the ranks making documentaries about filmmakers who inspired him, including Martin Scorsese, Clint Eastwood, Robert Altman and Francis Ford Coppola.

His documentary screening today about contemporary South Africa, "Reconciliation: Mandela's Miracle," may be a departure, but it began after his 1998 film on the Dalai Lama, "In Search of Kundun with Martin Scorsese."

He and his producer wife, Carol, said in a recent telephone interview the Dalai Lama actually suggested this latest documentary.

### **The Desert Sun: How did the Dalai Lama inspire this film?**

Michael Henry Wilson: When we finished ("In Search of Kundun") we had an audience with him in New York. We presented him with the documentary and he said, "What's your next project?" I said, "It would be something about the spirit of reconciliation, something that you embody in this world today and something you taught for eloquently in that documentary."

He said, "That sounds very good. I think the first person you should meet is Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. You should go to South Africa. That's where it all started." He was talking about Gandhi. The nonviolence philosophy was born there.

At the time, I envisioned a documentary that would be almost like a tapestry of all these Nobel Peace Prize winners.

Carol Wilson: The fact that he mentioned Mandela and Tutu first at the top of a very long list of Nobel Peace Prize winners was interesting to us. Then Michael has a long-standing relationship with Clint (Eastwood).

MVW: So, when I heard two years ago that Clint was going to do "Invictus" in South Africa, I asked Clint if it would be OK if we came and, parallel to (his) filming, do a documentary about the people who actually made the reconciliation possible — the Desmond Tutus, but also the bodyguards, the prison guards, Mandela's fellow prisoners at Robben Island, his entourage, etc., etc. Clint says, "It sounds great." So I had the videographer that followed Clint's film from beginning to end and was able to tell her the elements I would need.

CW: Clint's "Invictus" people had been working with the Nelson Mandela Foundation. I couldn't find the phone number for some of the people in the documentary, so they helped me locate some people and suggested some people to me. But basically, I cold-called (former South African President F.W.) de Klerk's foundations and Tutu's foundation. It helped to say we had the blessing of the Nelson Mandela Foundation and that was because Clint gave us his blessings.

### **Was there one person you thought was most integral to the telling of your story?**

MHW: Yes and in a way it was the most dramatic of interviews. It was the one with former President de

Klerk. His office said, "Yes, fine" (after they requested an interview) and we arrived at his office.

We set up our cameras and everybody was ready to shoot and suddenly he comes in and he's very angry. He looked at our proposal and saw that we were going to go to Johannesburg and film at the Museum of Apartheid. That museum doesn't do justice to de Klerk and his efforts as sort of a South African Gorbachev. He's actually kind of vilified in the museum.

So when he saw we were going to go to the museum, he said, "I'm not going to do the interview. What you're doing is probably going to be biased." I basically had 10 or 15 minutes to change his mind. Somehow, I did convince him that we were not doing a political film, we were trying to understand the process of reconciliation.

We said, "Well, I'll give you 10 minutes" and, an hour later, we were still talking. What really impressed me is that he defined very clearly what that process is and, at the end of the process, it can't be someone who feels a victor and the other one is vanquished. That's absolutely a key notion. When he was talking, I kept thinking the people in the Middle East should be listening to this man.

**That's the key to recovering from any war. Look how long it took our country to recover from the Civil War. The culture that led to the conflict was still in existence 100 years later.**

MHW: It took a century for African Americans to get the right to vote. In South Africa, that happened 14 years ago. It happened four years after Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

CW: We would go into a shopping mall and they don't have classifications like "Blacks," "Coloreds." You see people just sitting around in the streets with each other as if it's perfectly normal, and that's extraordinary.

On the other hand, the poverty is still horrendous. Achmat Dangor, the CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, who is in our documentary, said, "The problem is the poverty is still mainly black and that's because their education system was deliberately inferior." It's called Bantu Education and ironically it was de Klerk who was the head of education for years. Non-whites were trained to be servants, so we don't even have a generation of people who have grown up with supposedly equal schooling. (But) even in the United States a school in a poor district gets worse textbooks and is more overcrowded.

**THE DESERT SUN: That's the message of 'Waiting For Superman' – that schools that were created after World War II were created to prevent people from going to college because they needed factory workers.**

CAROL WILSON: There are some parallels. The fact is, the black population is still extremely disadvantaged and I don't know how many generations it will take (to reach parody).

**Regarding what you said about this not being a political film, if you had made it more about the apology program of Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the process of giving victims an opportunity to forgive as a means to reconciliation – it would have been a more political film. Were you trying to stay away from that?**

MICHAEL HENRY WILSON: It would have opened too many doors. The politics of South Africa are extremely complex. It's not just black vs. white, and I think you see it in the archival footage. There was a lot of black on black violence and that predates the whites colonizing the country. The Zulus and the Xhosas, the two biggest ethnic groups, have been at war for centuries. In their Constitutional Court, which is like a Supreme Court, there are 11 chairs representing 11 national languages.

CW: So the blacks were not one block and the same is true of the white. The Anglos of British origin share the supremacist views of the Afrikaners, which have Dutch origins. The Anglican Church didn't agree with the Dutch Reform Church, so there are different nuances within the white community. For instance, the people who legislated Apartheid in 1948, the Nationalist Party, were the Afrikaners. They were the ones in World War II on the side of the Germans and were fuming because the Anglos had sided with the Allies and had allowed the Americans and British to use some of the ports of South Africa (for

some troops. All the Dutch Afrikaners were for the Germans, and those are the people who took over in 1948. One of them was actually de Klerk's father and that's another fascinating aspect of the story. The son destroyed what the father established. Some of the key structures of Apartheid were laid by de Klerk's father.

**One of the things I got from the film is that reconciliation is more of an internal process than something that can be forced on you from an external source. It was like people discovered their bonding with people of other races partly through the rugby World Cup, partly through Mandela's personal charisma. I don't think just a truth and reconciliation program (requiring apologies) could have brought about reconciliation.**

CW: I agree. Tutu says in the movie reconciliation is not an event, it's a process. They admit it's partially successful and an incredible idea, but a lot of the higher ups never testified. A lot of them were foot soldiers and lower echelon people. So it wasn't entirely successful. On the other hand, it was an incredible idea.

### **Was the rugby World Cup a turning point?**

CW: Yes and no. It was an iconic moment and Mome duPlessis, the manager of the team, says in the movie, 'Let's face it, one event isn't going to solve all problems, but we all need special moments.' So, for the people that were there it was an absolutely stunning example of how the temperature of the country had changed. But, after the game, they're still stuck with millions of people who still live in poverty, low education levels, etc., etc. This is something we didn't go into, but the whole rugby union kind of fell apart because they went professional after that. Once money came into it there was a lot of infighting.

MHW: To me I think the most revealing comment was from Rory Steyn, the white bodyguard who was interviewed. This guy was literally one of the people hunting the freedom fighters, and I don't know how many people he killed, but what he experienced standing next to Mandela is pretty profound. It's quite a realization. I think it kind of exemplifies what happened at the World Cup.

## **Additional Facts**

'Reconciliation: Mandela's Miracle'

Country: U.S.

Program: Cinema Safari

Length: One hour, 28 minutes

Screening: 3:30 p.m. today and 5:30 p.m. Saturday at Regal Palm Springs 9. Director Michael Henry Wilson and his producer wife, Carol Wilson, will appear at today's screening.

Film fest info

What: The Palm Springs International Film Festival

When: Today-Jan. 17

Where: Various theaters in Palm Springs

Tickets/information: [\(800\) 898-7256](tel:8008987256) or [psfilmfest.org](http://psfilmfest.org)