

1. The interviewer asks Anthony Fabian to explain the origins of his interest in the story of Sandra Laing and how he first heard her tale on a BBC radio documentary?

Anthony Fabian discusses the impact on him of hearing a BBC radio documentary programme called No Triumph, No Tragedy. It usually featured the stories of people with disabilities and Fabian's answer explains why Sandra Laing's experiences were included in this series. He describes his reaction to the programme – how he was moved to tears - including the first thoughts of Sandra's story being suitable for some sort of film treatment. (Time 00.00-02.21)

2. You have a history of documentary making. Why did you not consider making a documentary about Sandra Laing instead of a feature film?
(Also see Question 17)

Anthony Fabian outlines some of the films he has made in addition to documentaries. Next he explains why he felt Sandra's story was important enough to justify the length of time it can take to make a film. He mentions other documentaries that have been made over the years about this story including one in the 1970s by Anthony Thomas called The Search For Sandra Laing, and why these precedents made him more eager than ever to make a feature film rather than another documentary. He also explores the power of feature films – their ability to reach a wider audience. (Time: 02.02 – 04.35)

3. What 'liberties' did you have to take with Sandra Laing's real story when creating the screenplay – are there changes or omissions that you regret?

Anthony Fabian discusses the extent to which Sandra Laing's story (spanning 30 years) had to be adapted to fit into the limits of a one hundred and forty-five minute film. He describes why many 'dramatic events' in Sandra's life had to be dropped and why a few incidents had to be invented. He explains how such invention can be done sympathetically – in a way that does not cheat the audience or betray Sandra. He describes how important it is to remember that a film needs to be dramatic and entertaining and what impact this had on how Sandra's story was told. Fabian describes how he never added in things that were complete fiction, but did include things that were 'conjectures' – things that could have happened quite easily. He also discusses how sometimes things had to be added to help the actors or to define more clearly the 'character arcs certain people in the film went through. (Time: 04.39 – 07.24)

4. It is clear from the film that Sandra ends up finding it hard fitting in with both white and black communities in South Africa. Is this something you wanted to demonstrate in the film?

Anthony Fabian maps out Sandra's early life and the changes that occurred as soon as she had to go to school, leaving the rural area where she grew up. He describes the necessity for making her a bit older in the film than she was when she went to Piet Retief School. He explains how Sandra's 'sense of self' changed as did her sense of belonging. He explains the challenges that Sandra faced and the benefits she derived from being with Petrus and his mother and being a part of an African family for a while. Of course, Sandra had to adapt to the culture and ways of living among Black people. (Time: 07.26-11.34)

5. Has Sandra seen the film? What was her reaction to it?

Listen to Anthony Fabian as he explains Sandra's involvement in the project and her reaction to an early screening of the film. "Very, very beautiful – sad..." Fabian uses the word 'cathartic'. It derives from Greek tragedy and the experience audiences can have seeing terrible events on stage which enable them to purge themselves of their bad emotions – so a positive thing. (Time: 11.35-13.22)

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6. What were your main aims for making SKIN?

Anthony Fabian identifies two goals – he reiterates the importance of gaining an audience for Sandra’s story and also spells out how the film is a form of restitution for her. Sandra’s recovery, her rehabilitation, he argues, as told in the film mirrors the kind of healing process the whole country has been going through. Her story is bigger than just a tale about one individual – it captures the experiences of the entire country – another reason for making a feature film and not a documentary. Anthony Fabian outlines the crimes against humanity and common sense that the film exposes by telling Sandra’s story. He provides an anecdote based on something the actor Sam Neill playing Abraham Laing said during the shoot. (Time: 13.24-16.35)

7. One thing that is very present in the film is the landscape of South Africa – can you explain the use you wanted to put the landscape to at times in the film?

Anthony Fabian discusses how the landscape contributed to the film’s ‘epic’ qualities and did so in a way that did not add significantly to the cost of the film. He talks very helpfully about how the landscape was used to suggest the circumstances various characters were facing at points in the film- when Sandra left home for example or the vista shown following the destruction of the settlement where she lived with Petrus. He also indicates how the landscape at the very start of the film sets the scene suggesting the site of struggle – the land – between white and black in South African history, while its beauty seems to transcend such conflict, making the conflict seem absurd. The landscape also continues to put South Africa’s current struggles into perspective. (Time: 16.36-20.30)

8. Why do you feel the story needs to be told now?

Anthony Fabian talks about people’s forgetfulness and the way that time is moving on and a new post-Apartheid generation is growing up in South Africa. He makes links with other films that have reminded and educated audiences about past events – the holocaust, for example. He talks about how important it is to tell the story of how this oppressive experiment affected ordinary people. (20.31-22.21)

9. Can you expand on the idea of Sandra’s life exemplifying her generation’s struggles and the bigger political story of South Africa?

He points out how few points of contact there were between Sandra’s life and the struggle against the system that discriminated against her. Her story enabled Fabian to deal with the politics of apartheid indirectly. He identifies how she was constantly affected but it was only when she made trips to the city, for example to visit the Home Affairs Ministry, that she gains any sense of an anti-Apartheid movement’s existence. The destruction of her home is also one of those moments when apartheid caught up with her very directly. He discusses the fact that people in rural areas were in some ways cut off from the struggle that had a far greater impact on city dwellers – both black and white. (Time: 22.23-26.13)

11. Can you discuss how the script evolved over the period 2001-7?

Anthony Fabian tells how the script took a very long time to develop. He discusses the reasons for asking Helena Kriel to draft the first script and how it was necessary to supplement her insights with the perspectives of other Afrikaners and people with Zulu and Swazi backgrounds. He discusses the actor workshops that he was funded by the UK Film Council to run in 2004 using the existing script and how productive that was in pushing things on dramatically. He talks too of the way in which actors can ask for changes and tweak scenes and what they say. (Time: 26.14-30.47)

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12. Can you discuss the film's end? Why did you decide to stop when you did, keeping the details of some of Sandra's more recent struggles out of the picture?

Here you can hear Anthony Fabian discuss the decision to make Sandra's reunion with her mother after 27 years the dramatic end to the film and how after that it was felt best to 'exit quickly'. He suggests what people who want to know more should do – in particular reading the biography. (Time: 30.48-32.33)

13. Could you tell us something about the casting process and the challenges it poses a filmmaker?

Anthony Fabian breaks the process down into two levels. He describes how he went about casting the principal parts and the need to acquire people capable of exciting investors enough to plough money into the film and also finding people able to handle these parts – many of which cover decades and which require convincing South African accents. It was a long process. He discusses the fact that there are few black women actors with immediate box-office impact who would have been suitable for SKIN and even fewer South African actresses. Fabian talks of how fortunate it was to get Sophie Okonedo to agree to play Sandra not only because of her capacity for playing a teenage Sandra and the same character twenty years later. It was a time also when her fame was rising thanks to an Oscar nomination for her work in the film Hotel Rwanda.

He then goes on to discuss the task of casting the 77 other speaking parts in the film and how he went about this process through three stages - the workshops, the rough filming of a few key scenes needed for further fund-raising efforts. It was at this stage when they found Ella Ramangwane who plays the young Sandra. Then followed a three-week formal casting period. (Time 32.33-39.00)

14. Would you be able to tell us a bit about the way in which the film SKIN was financed? (Also see question 18.)

Anthony Fabian discusses the need to put together as good 'a package' – script and actors – as possible – one that is likely to attract backers confident the film might be profitable. He also spells out the role of the 'sales agent' and the calculations they make about the possible 'value' or 'sales estimates' of a film across the world and how that affects the budget. Of course – these measures are blunt. (Time: 39.02- 42.51)

15. How did you 'pitch' the film to people you thought might back it with money?

Anthony Fabian explains the way in which he described Sandra Laing's story and how it lent itself to a simple yet compelling 'pitch' and how various questions spun out from that foundation. (Time: 42.52-44.24)

16. What factors do you feel will contribute to SKIN's continuing relevance?

Anthony Fabian describes how important it was for him to make a film about big issues rather than something designed only to be entertaining. He discusses some of the film's key themes and how they are still important and topical in our society – racism, exclusion. Skin has things to say to us, Fabian suggests about the modern world. He makes links between SKIN and the 2008 US Presidential Elections. He sees the film having lasting interest within education particularly. (Time: 44.24-47.46)

17. We return to Fabian's background as a filmmaker and director of opera and how this has fed into the making of SKIN.

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Anthony Fabian also discusses his background as a filmmaker and how he worked in opera as a way of gaining experience. He talks of the benefit of coming to film from a different discipline and how his interest in music enriched the music used in SKIN. He explains how he hoped the music he used helps express Sandra's journey – combining a Western score but combining it with African instruments – especially percussion instruments. He also mentions the use of choral music too. (Time: 47.46-51.30)

18. We return to the budget and ask about the costs involved in the film's bigger set-piece scenes.

Anthony Fabian discusses some of the key parts of the film and how they contributed to the cost. He dwells in particular on two of the big set-piece scenes and the challenges they posed him: the election-day scene and the destruction of Sandra and Petrus' shop. (Time: 51.31-54.48)