

nothing is more contagious than lies

Life, Above All

A Film by
OLIVER SCHMITZ



OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
FESTIVAL DE CANNES



BAVARIA FILM INTERNATIONAL PRESENTS A DREAMER JOINT VENTURE PRODUCTION IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH SENATOR FILM PRODUKTION, ENIGMA PICTURES AND NIAMA-FILM STARRING KHOMOTISO MANYAKA
LERATO MVELASE HARRIET MANAMELA KEOBANA MAKANYANE AND TINAH MNUMUZANA COSTUME DESIGNER ANJIA KRUGER PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHRISTIANE RÖTKE
EDITOR DIRK GIBAU DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BERNHARD JASPER MUSIC BY ALI N. ASKIN ASSOCIATE PRODUCER DANIELA RAMIN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER HELGE SÄSSE CO-PRODUCERS GREIG BUCKLE
AND THOMAS REISSER DAN SCHLÄNDER BASED UPON THE NOVEL "CHANDA'S SECRETS" BY ALLAN STRATTON WRITTEN BY DENNIS HOON PRODUCER OLIVER STOLTZ DIRECTED BY OLIVER SCHMITZ

WWW.LIFE-ABOVE-ALL.COM

DREAMER

SENATOR

NIAMA-FILM

medienboard

FTI

BAVARIA FILM

INTERNATIONAL

BAVARIA FILM

INTERNATIONAL

BAVARIA FILM

INTERNATIONAL

BAVARIA FILM

INTERNATIONAL

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Just after the death of her newly-born baby sister, Chanda, 12 years old, learns of a rumor that spreads like wildfire through her small, dust-ridden village near Johannesburg. It destroys her family and forces her mother to flee. Sensing that the gossip stems from prejudice and superstition, Chanda leaves home and school in search of her mother and the truth.



SYNOPSIS

In the dusty small town of Elandsdoorn, a South African township not far from Johannesburg, life is simple and serene. A prevailing sense of deep pride tightly bonds together the entire community – but beware to those who step out of line ...

12-year-old Chanda is a hardworking promising young student with a bright future, but her life changes dramatically when her baby sister unexpectedly dies. Heartbroken, Chanda's mother, Lillian, in turn becomes severely ill. Her stepfather drowns himself in alcohol, leaving the young girl to take care of her two smaller siblings. Meanwhile, the formerly friendly neighbors become increasingly distant and gossip spreads.

"Auntie" Tafa does what she can to help by getting Lillian to leave town, but not even "Auntie" is immune to the cloud of fear filtering across Elandsdoorn. Suspecting that the community's irrational ostracism has to do with her mother's illness and the death of her baby sister, Chanda demands answers but is met with stubborn silence. Unwilling to bear the weight of secrecy any longer, Chanda sets out to face a deeply engrained, unspoken taboo ...

LIFE, ABOVE ALL is a emotional and universal drama about a young girl (stunningly performed by first-time-actress Khomotso Manyaka) who fights the fear and shame that have poisoned her community. The film captures the enduring strength of loyalty and a courage powered by the heart. Directed by South African filmmaker Oliver Schmitz ("Mapantsula", "Paris, je t'aime"), it is based on the international award winning novel "Chanda's Secrets" by Allan Stratton.

THE FILMMAKERS

OLIVER SCHMITZ – Director

Oliver Schmitz, the child of German immigrants, was born in 1960 in Cape Town, South Africa. After graduating from high school in 1978, he enrolled in the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town and graduated four years later with a BA in Fine Arts. During his college years he worked at “scratch,” the legendary nightclub he co-founded in the early 80’s, as a co-manager and DJ. In 1983 Schmitz began a two-year apprenticeship as an editor in Johannesburg, and from 1985 to 1986 he worked as an editor for the WDR in Dortmund, one of the largest German public broadcasters. He returned to South Africa, which was still segregated by apartheid, to direct his first feature film. Without the permission of the local authorities he shot the gangster drama “Mapantsula” in the township of Soweto. The film was well received by South Africa’s black population and has gained a cult status. The film debuted at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival in the section “Un Certain Regard” and went on to receive awards for best film, best director and best editing at the AA Vita Awards. The film garnered a number of international distinctions, including the Interchurch Film Award at the Filmfest in Munich and the Australian Human Rights Award. Yet the highest honors were bestowed on “Mapantsula” in 2006 when it was named the best South African film of the decade at the South African Film and Television Awards. In the late 80’s Schmitz teamed with other documentary filmmakers to direct nine documentaries in a row, among them “Jo’burg Stories,” commissioned by Arte in 1997. In 2000 he shot his second feature film, “Hijack Stories,” another gangster drama, which he wrote and directed. With “increasingly longer waiting periods” between projects he moved to Germany that year, where he quickly made a name for himself as a successful television director. Yet he never turned his back on cinema and, in 2005, Oliver Schmitz and other directors, including the Coen Brothers, Gus Van Sant and Alexander Payne, directed the feature film “Paris je t’aime” (2006), which had its world premiere in Cannes. Throughout his career, Schmitz received numerous awards, among them the German Television Award in 2008 for “Doctor’s Diary” and the Adolf-Grimme Award in 2007 for best director and the Grand Prix ‘Cinéma Tout Ecran’ at the film festival in Geneva for the critically acclaimed television series, “Turkish for Beginners.” In 2010 Oliver Schmitz, who lives in Berlin with his family, plans to shoot his next film, an adaptation of Wladimir Kaminer’s “Russendisco.”

FILMOGRAPHY (SELECTION)

2010	LIFE, ABOVE ALL
2009	ALLEIN UNTER SCHÜLERN (TV)
2008 - 2005	TURKISH FOR BEGINNERS/TÜRKISCH FÜR ANFÄNGER (TV)
2007 - 2006	DOCTOR’S DIARY (TV)
2003	PARIS JE T’AIME
2000	HIJACK STORIES
1997	JO’BURG STORIES (Documentary)
1987	MAPANTSULA

OLIVER STOLTZ – Producer

Oliver Stoltz, born in 1969 in Bonn, studied film at the HFF Konrad Wolf and at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. As an independent producer he produced numerous feature films, TV movies and documentary films, including “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door.” He also produced several feature films by first-time filmmakers such as Thomas Brussig, Martin Gypkens, Péter Palátsik, Isabel Kleefeld and Ali Samadi Ahadi. His own directing debut, “Lost Children,” had a successful theatrical run, received the German Film Award in 2006 for best documentary and was nominated for an EMMY in 2009. The film also won numerous prizes at film festivals such as the Panorama – Audience Award, Berlinale 2005, as well as the UNICEF-Film Award and the Al-Jazeera Award in 2006. He also produced “Leroy,” Armin Völcker’s blaxploitation comedy, which was recognized at the German Film Awards in 2008 in the categories best children and youth film and best score, and in 2009 the comedy “Salami Aleikum” from director Ali Samadi Ahadi, which enjoyed a successful theatrical release in Germany and Austria.

FILMOGRAPHY (SELECTION)

	Title	Director
2010	LIFE, ABOVE ALL	Oliver Schmitz
	THE GREEN WAVE	Ali Samadi Ahadi (in production)
	SPEED	Florian Opitz (in production)
	KILLING SEEDS	Bettina Borgfeld, David Bernet (in production)
	AM HANG	Markus Imboden (in pre-production)
2009	SALAMI ALEIKUM	Ali Samadi Ahadi
2007	LEROY	Armin Völckers
2005	LOST CHILDREN	Oliver Stoltz, Ali Samadi Ahadi
1997	KNOCKIN’ ON HEAVEN’S DOOR	Thomas Jahn



DENNIS FOON – Screenwriter

Dennis Foon, born on November 18, 1951, into a working class family in Detroit, studied religion at the University of Michigan after graduating from high school. But, encouraged by his friends and teachers, Foon devoted increasing time to his secret passion: writing and, once his first short story won an award, he enrolled in the MFA program in creative writing at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver in 1973. In 1974 he co-founded the Green Thumb Theatre, serving as its artistic director for the next twelve years. During that time he wrote a number of plays for children and adults and produced and directed several Green Thumb productions that he took on tour around the world. In 1987 Foon left Vancouver and began to work as a freelancer. He directed at theatres in Toronto, Copenhagen and London, and devoted more of his time to writing, completing a number of screenplays for TV movies and feature films. Foon is at home with many genres – including thriller, sci-fi, family drama and horror. In 1996 he finished the sensational youth portrait “Little Criminals,” which garnered him numerous awards, among them the coveted Gemini Award (Canadian Television Award) for best television drama. Dennis Foon, who lives in Canada, has recently co-authored the film “A Shine of Rainbows,” starring Connie Nielsen and Aidan Quinn, which premiered at the 2009 Toronto Film Festival and received two awards at the International Children’s Film Festival in Chicago, the award of the children’s jury and the audience award.

ALLAN STRATTON – Author

Allan Stratton, born in 1951 in Stratford, Canada, was raised by his grandparents – first on a farm and later in Kincardine, a small town at Lake Huron. At the age of five he began to entertain his friends with plays in the family backyard and by eighth grade, he read a book a day, everything from comics to Shakespeare. At the University of Toronto he studied English but began to appear frequently on stage as an actor. After completing his MA, he devoted his entire time to acting and, as of 1974, has appeared on numerous Canadian stages. All the while he continued to write and in 1977, his first play, “72 Under the O,” premiered at the Vancouver Playhouse. Stratton moved to New York in 1982, where he joined the legendary Actors’ Studio as a writer/director. In the late 80’s he returned to Canada. The majority of his plays – dramas as well as comedies – appeared successfully on stage and received numerous national and international awards. In the mid 90’s Stratton became the head of the theatre department at the Etobicoke School of the Arts, where he taught acting, directing and creative writing for the stage and screen. After a few years he realized how much he missed writing and resigned. At that point Stratton began to write prose, which garnered him the same success as his plays. In 2004 his novel “Chandas’s Secrets” was published and turned out to be a bestseller that was translated into numerous languages and received awards in many countries. In March 2008, Stratton, who lives in Toronto with his partner and two cats, published the sequel, “Chanda’s War”. His most recent work, “Borderline,” was published in 2010 in the United States and Canada to rave reviews.

BERNHARD JASPER – Director of Photography

Bernhard Jasper was born in 1972 in Tiengen, Baden-Württemberg. His diverse body of work includes numerous feature and television films as well as many commercials. His tremendous sense for lighting and composition manifests itself across various genres, including adventure (“Open Water 2: Adrift”), musical (“Rock It!”), comedy (“Kleinruppin Forever”) and crime series (“KDD – Kriminaldauerdienst”). His work has garnered him numerous national and international awards, for example at the London Advertising Festival and the New York Film Festival. He has also been nominated for the German Television Award as well as the German Film Award. LIFE, ABOVE ALL marks his second collaboration with director Oliver Schmitz, after the successful television series “Doctor’s Diary.”

CHRISTIANE ROTHE – Production Designer

For more than ten years Christiane Rothe has worked as a prop master, art director and production designer on film and television productions. Among her most notable works are the Oscar® winning international success “The Lives of Others” and the feature film “Leroy” (2007), which received two German Film Awards in 2008. Her most recent film is Chris Kraus’s “Poll,” for which she created the production design in the summer of 2009 in Estland.



THE ACTORS

KHOMOTSO MANYAKA – Chanda

Khtomosto Manyaka comes from Elandsdoorn, South Africa, where she was born in 1996. She attended the local high school and caught the eyes of talent scouts during a choir performance. She was excited when she was asked to participate in the casting for LIFE, ABOVE ALL and has turned out to be a natural as an actress. To play the heroine Chanda, she stepped in front of the camera for the first time.

LERATO MVELASE – Lillian

Lerato Mvelase was born in Soweto, South Africa in 1982. During her school years at Sacred Heart College, she participated in numerous plays and decided early on to make a career out of her favorite pastime. In 2002 she graduated from Wits University in Johannesburg, where she studied acting. In the same year she joined the TV station CCM1 as an announcer. After a short stint on a soap, she played her first lead role, portraying a college student on the successful series “Mzansi.” She had to relinquish that role to another actress for the show’s second season because her hosting duties on the “Mindset Educational TV” (until 2005) demanded most of her time. Since 2005 Lerato Mvelase has played another student on the television series “Home Affairs.” She has also appeared on stage in productions of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” “Grease” and “Moulin Rouge,” and regularly takes on singing engagements. LIFE, ABOVE ALL is her first feature film.

HARRIET MANAMELA – Mrs. Tafa

Harriet Manamela, born in 1971 in Diepkloof, South Africa, participated in numerous theater projects after graduating from high school in the Alexandra township. Against the wishes of her father, who wanted her to study law, she became an actress. In 1987 she appeared on stage for the first time at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg and has done so repeatedly to this day. She played her first television role in 1998 on “Soul City,” which led to numerous parts on television, among them the miniseries “When We Were Black.” She was first directed by Oliver Schmitz in 2000 when she played a minor role in his gangster drama “Hijack Stories.” Later she was seen alongside stars such as Don Cheadle, Juliette Binoche and Samuel L. Jackson in international productions including “Hotel Ruanda” and “In My Country.” For her performance in “Isidingo” she was nominated for a Vita Award for best supporting actress. In her spare time Harriet Manemela works on theater projects for children in the townships of Johannesburg.

KEAOBAKA MAKANYANE – Esther

Keaobaka Makanyane, born 1996, calls Elandsdoorn, South Africa, her home. There she participated in a casting session for LIFE, ABOVE ALL and was cast on the spot for the role of Esther, Chanda’s best friend. She sings in the school choir and wants to become an actress when she grows up.

AUBREY POOLO – Jonah

Aubrey Poole, born 1977, is also playing his first feature film role in LIFE, ABOVE ALL. By the age of six he had discovered his passion for theater, which he pursued from then on with great determination, even though his grandfather had planned a career in politics for him. He appeared on numerous smaller stages until he joined the South African State Theatre in Pretoria in 1999. It is there that he shortly after met his mentor, the South African director Paul Grootboom. Aubrey Poolo has classical theater training but also knows modern African dance including Gumboot Dance, Pantsula Dance and Kofifi.



PRODUCTION NOTES

“The novel moved me to tears.” Producer Oliver Stoltz

THE NOVEL

Like many other films, *LIFE, ABOVE ALL* came about by coincidence, because two complete strangers happened to be at the same place at the same time. It was in April 2005 that producer Oliver Stoltz attended the renowned hotDOCS-Festivals in Toronto to present his documentary “Lost Children” about child soldiers in Uganda. Allan Stratton, a Canadian writer based in Toronto who also happens to be a film enthusiast, had read about the film in the paper and contacted Stoltz by email. He told him that he was writing a book about the tragic fate of child soldiers in Africa and would be interested in meeting him. And so Stoltz and Stratton met during the festival for a first informal exchange of ideas. “Later we talked on the phone occasionally,” Oliver Stoltz remembers. “I believe, I was able to help him with his book because, after making “Lost Children,” I knew a lot about the topic. At some point, Allan sent me a draft of his novel, but also a copy of its predecessor, “Chanda’s Secrets.”

“Chanda’s Secrets” was first published in 2004 in North America. It won numerous awards and turned out to be a bestseller in eleven countries. In the book 16-year-old Chanda not only finds out how ever-present death is in the southern parts of Africa, but also how no one around her dares to talk openly about the cause of these deaths – AIDS. It’s the children that suffer most from the consequences. There are an estimated 800,000 AIDS-related orphans who have to fend for themselves without any support from the government or other sources. The film that Oliver Stoltz wanted to make after reading the novel is dedicated to those children. “Chanda’s Secrets” is a story about children who have to take on responsibilities much too early in life and never get to experience a normal childhood. It is a universal issue that affects children all over the world. Oliver Stoltz was also fascinated by the idea of “telling a story about how people deal with ‘open’ secrets. Everyone has them. One person is drinking, another betrays others and the next one is too ashamed to admit to being unemployed.” You keep it to yourself out of fear of being rejected. How does that affect children who are just beginning to grasp that dynamic, and how is this corroding society? The fear of becoming an outsider forces everyone to keep quiet or to lie. In the case of Chanda, people around her are being stigmatized because of AIDS. That happens not just in Africa.” Oliver Stoltz was moved to tears reading Stratton’s novel: “It is so well told and has the potential to reach an even broader audience as a film because, in the end, *LIFE, ABOVE ALL* is very much a hopeful tale about the power of friendship, solidarity and loyalty.”

“I wrote “Chanda’s Secrets,” the author Allan Stratton tells us, “to give this pandemic a face. I wanted the reader to be able to discover human drama therein. In the best of all cases, stories can develop a lot of strength. You can’t tell them, however, with a pointed finger or by hammering people with a message. At the core of it have to be individuals and their experiences. If the author

manages to write in such a way that the reader finds emotional access to the events, the reader will become the characters’ best friend and will strongly identify with what is happening to them.”

The novel triggered similar thoughts and emotions in Oliver Stoltz. “I was most of all impressed by Chanda’s character,” he explains. “She’s a classical heroine who rebels against the norms and values of her surroundings.” However, AIDS wasn’t Stoltz’s primary focus. It was the prejudices described in the book that people who are HIV positive are subjected to and the ghettoization that comes with it.

Stoltz felt the book definitely went beyond the narrowly conceived topic of AIDS in Africa. “The same happens in Germany,” he says. “The prejudices and taboos here are no different than they are in South Africa. What really inspired me in reading Stratton’s book were the values it represents, which I share wholeheartedly, but also the young girl’s commitment to helping outsiders and to fighting for her family, the oppressed and for justice. And, of course, the mother-daughter story moved me, and that Allan Stratton managed to convey how important family is, especially in times when everything begins to crumble. To me, this is a universal issue.”



“The project came together quickly – only two years passed from initial idea to the first day of shooting.” Director Oliver Schmitz

THE GENESIS

It didn't take Oliver Stoltz long to make up his mind to turn “Chanda's Secrets” into a film. His decision was influenced by the fact that he himself had lived in the southern part of Africa and that he had toyed with the idea to produce a film that was set there for quite some time. Now he had found more than just a subject matter that inspired him. Right away he knew which director he wanted for the project: Oliver Schmitz. He recalls having been particularly impressed by his first film, “Mapantsula” (1988), which – shot with great personal effort and despite numerous prohibitions – portrayed the life of the black population during apartheid. To make LIFE, ABOVE ALL with a German director without a personal connection to South Africa was never an option for him.

He had known his first choice, Oliver Schmitz, the son of German parents born and raised in South Africa, for some time. Schmitz's emigration to Germany about 10 years ago had been for mostly professional reasons: “In South Africa the wait between two projects was too long for me. And I believed I had to work more.” As a result, he says with a smile on his face, “I shot for television more or less nonstop” for the last eight years. Among his work are several successful as well as critically acclaimed series, including “Turkish for Beginners” and “Doctor's Diary.” Soon, however, he began harboring the wish to shoot ‘at home’ again. But when the chance presented itself, it was his

workload that kept him from turning his attention to Allan Stratton's novel – although he had expressed general interest in collaborating with Oliver Stoltz on the project: “LIFE, ABOVE ALL sat on my desk for quite some time – unread. When I finally started to read it, I couldn't put it down. The book tells a moving story. I thought that Allan Stratton had found a good way to show us the impact of AIDS and HIV in southern Africa.” He had barely finished the book when he made a commitment to the project.

Luckily, finding a screenwriter did not take long. Allan Stratton, who's made a name for himself as a playwright, didn't want to adapt the novel himself. And so producer Oliver Stoltz, who, in the meantime, had found a Canadian co-producer, followed a recommendation and hired Dennis Foon (“Mirror Games”), one of Canada's most accomplished playwrights and screenwriters. Says Schmitz, “As it turns out, he was an old friend of Allan's. He had of course read the book and liked it a lot. That made him an obvious choice for us.” The producer and director soon invited Foon to come to Berlin to discuss the direction they wanted to take the screenplay.

“Working with Dennis Foon was fantastic,” says Oliver Schmitz. “The novel is a first-person account and we thought long and hard about how we would make do without this inner voice. What we definitely didn't want was a voiceover narration. We condensed the story quite a bit and focused on two sections in the book: the one surrounding Sara's funeral and the second and more important one, when Chanda, after Lillian falls ill and leaves the family, fights to bring her back.” That Chanda is three years younger in the film than in the book is a result of research that was conducted locally.

The team realized how fast kids in South Africa grow up. “In the book Chanda is 16,” says Schmitz, “but in reality, 16-year-olds have already lost their childlike qualities.” Although the core of the story remained the same, many small changes were made including in terms of the dialogue. Says Schmitz, “Allan's novel is loosely set in the southern part of Africa, but we tried to be very specific when it came to language and culture. To me such details are very important because I want to make sure that I represent the reality correctly. If one accomplishes that then one automatically tells a universal story.”

When Stoltz, Schmitz and Foon took off on a ten-day trip to South Africa, they already had a first draft of the script – “a solid foundation, so now we could see where we needed and could insert more reality. Every day we had research appointments and writing meetings,” explains Stoltz. “In the western hemisphere people tend to generalize when they speak about Africa. But that creates a construct that doesn't hold up. We wanted to be very specific. That's also why I decided not to shoot the film in English, but in a wonderful local language called Sepedi. It made the whole thing even more authentic.”



“We hired many locals from Elandsdoorn as actors and to help behind the scenes.” Co-Producer Greig Buckle

THE LOCATION

For research purposes the threesome traveled to Elandsdoorn, a township located about 200 kilometers northeast of Johannesburg in the South African province of Mpumalanga, to visit the Ndlovu Medical Center. Oliver Stoltz had heard about the facility from Vivi Eickelberg, a music manager he met at a reception in Berlin, who told him about her efforts to help the Dutch physician Hugo Tempelman, a family practitioner, and his wife Liesje, who had successfully established the facility in 1994. After a few preliminary conversations with Tempelman in Berlin, arrangements were made for Stoltz, Schmitz and Foon to be welcomed by the staff of the Ndlovu Medical Center so that they could gain unobstructed insight into the local conditions. This is also how contact with the youngest victims of the AIDS pandemic came about, for example, “kids like Esther, who had lost both of her parents,” says Oliver Schmitz. “We also met a 14-year-old who had to take care of her two younger sisters, which she’s been doing for four years. Her relatives aren’t helping her, only a neighbor is, and she’s not old enough to apply for government assistance. Sadly, her tragic situation isn’t unique, there are way too many cases like this one. Witnessing this helped us to see the bigger picture and to better understand the story we were telling.”

When it was agreed upon to travel to Elandsdoorn to conduct research, no decisions had been made about the eventual shooting location. But Oliver Stoltz was immediately taken by what he saw in and around the Ndlovu Medical Center. “Elandsdoorn isn’t the type of slum and massive squalor that we here in Germany associate with a township, which wasn’t something we want to show in the film in any case. We wanted to show dignified living conditions, a sort of middle class.”

Greig Buckle, a film producer from Cape Town who co-produced LIFE, ABOVE ALL, his first German-South African collaboration, was relieved to find out that Oliver Stoltz and Oliver Schmitz had early on established close contacts in Elandsdoorn, where they later filmed their story. Says Stoltz, “Once things began to come together, Jerry Marobyane was assigned to be our contact in Elandsdoorn. He introduced us to the people and the community as a whole and put us in direct contact with locals. Plus, as an insider, he made a lot of things a whole lot easier.” People in Elandsdoorn were quite interested, especially in terms of employment opportunities that the film team might provide. “Long before we started shooting,” says Oliver Stoltz, “we had a meeting with the whole community and everyone was there, even representatives from the church, and during the conversation the question was brought up, and rightfully so, if and how the town would benefit from our film project.”

That he was able to convince Greig Buckle to come on board was a stroke of luck for Oliver Stoltz. “On my search for a South African co-producer I met almost every producer in the business. Unfortunately, most of them specialized in financing, meaning they didn’t care much about the content of a project. They were mostly focused on servicing. And since many U.S. productions are

being shot in South Africa, they are used to certain dimensions. And so if you don’t have a sizable project and can’t pay more or less Hollywood paydays then most people turn you away. Plus, I was looking for a co-producer anyway, someone who cares about the story as much as we did. And with Greig we found the right match. His enthusiasm for the story convinced many collaborators in South Africa to participate in the film, even though we couldn’t pay Hollywood paydays.”

Oliver Schmitz remembers that, although it had been decided early on to shoot in original locations, “it had been considered to build a set for Chanda’s house – mostly so we wouldn’t have to depend on the weather. But we quickly realized that we couldn’t have replicated all these details. In the end you can never recreate the atmosphere you can capture at original locations in the studio.”

Co-producer Greig Buckle, too, prefers to shoot on location rather than shooting exclusively in the studio: “It makes everything come across as more realistic. In the case of LIFE, ABOVE ALL, the story we were shooting in Elandsdoorn partially reflected or was similar to the everyday life of people who live there. Besides, there are things that even the best art director can’t capture, even if they recreate the entire original location. In the end shooting on location adds tremendously to the value of the film. The finished product gains an enormous amount of depth and realism.”



ON THE SET

LIFE, ABOVE ALL was shot in Elandsdoorn between November 16, 2009, and February 8, 2010. Despite the tight shooting schedule, the production went on hiatus for several weeks in January 2010 so that Lerato Mvelase (Lillian) and Aubrey Poole (Jonah) could put on some weight. In the early part of the shoot they filmed scenes in which their characters were marked by their illness, AIDS, and were therefore very thin. “A dietary regimen had been put together for me so I could lose weight,” remembers Lerato Mvelase, who rolls her eyes, laughing. “I really missed my chocolate!” Being on a diet occasionally put her in a bad mood, but she also learned that “there are so many things in life that we think we can’t do without – but we can!” The experience was also useful because it helped her identify with her character, Lillian. Entering Lillian’s house for the first time was also very helpful. “That’s when I realized how important it was that we shot on original locations. I could literally smell and sense the poverty and the loneliness in that house. It was also helpful that I saw the houses of real neighbors when I stepped outside and that I saw kids with runny noses walking down the street. On a set where you can still smell the paint and the press wood, this would all have been different.”

LIFE, ABOVE ALL tells a sad story, but director Oliver Schmitz made sure that the set was a relaxed and happy environment: “That was particularly important for the girls. They had to be able to relax and be happy during takes.” Lerato Mvelase agrees: “On days with highly emotional scenes the First AD asked everyone to be a little more quiet than usual. Most of the time the set was like bedlam and it was tough to concentrate.” In that sense the LIFE, ABOVE ALL set was like every other set: Some days were very stressful and on others everyone was joking around, making noise. But according to Lerato Mvelase, Oliver Schmitz was always the calm grounding center, “and that was wonderful, because if he’d lost his calm, we’d all would have lost it. Oliver always took the time to explain what he wanted. And he only stopped shooting when he got what he wanted. Sometimes that was rather exhausting. But Oliver is a wonderful director – and a lovely person.” Author Allan Stratton, who visited the set for several days in December 2009, was impressed with the way Schmitz led his team: “He has no airs of any sort. He’s incredibly focused and controlled, but never uptight or without a sense of humor. It was important to him that the atmosphere was easygoing and friendly and I think that is very important,

especially when you are shooting a highly dramatic story such as LIFE, ABOVE ALL.”

“When the author of the book visits the set,” Schmitz says, recalling Stratton’s visit, “one gets a little nervous. After all, most of the time the original work has been altered substantially. The fact that Chanda and Esther are younger in the film had initially led to a lot of conversations with Allan. He had his doubts that it would work – especially when it came to the relationship with Chanda’s younger siblings. But after he’d seen the actors he was convinced that it had been the right decision. Allan seemed very happy on the set and kept complimenting us. In that respect everything went well.”

Although Oliver Schmitz grew up in South Africa, Sepedi, the local dialect in which LIFE, ABOVE ALL was shot, is a foreign language for him. “But that wasn’t a big deal,” he says. “In the beginning it created a few problems. But I think I quickly got a feeling for the sound and the flow of the language. Plus, I had Harriet Manamela, who played Mrs. Tafa, at my side. She was like a teacher to the children and to me, she was an advisor when it came to all things Sepedi. When there were difficulties or when mistakes happened, she immediately pointed them out to me. In addition, I closely watched the faces and watched the emotions, interpreted them – and I believe, that’s how it all worked out rather well.”

“You’re always nervous when the author of the book visits the set.” Director Oliver Schmitz

Quality control was important to DoP Bernhard Jasper, too, who was also the operator on this shoot: “Because I was working two jobs at once and because you have to pay a lot of attention in each shot to so many little technical details – making sure the focus is right and the mic isn’t hanging into the frame – I often couldn’t follow whether or not the images were tracking emotionally. That’s why I generally watched them afterwards on the monitor.” In terms of camera technology, producer Oliver Stoltz explains, “We were at the top of the game. We shot digitally and were the first German film to shoot with a new ARRI technique in which two frames are shot right after the other and are merged in post-production to create a scope image. Plus, we were very lucky to be able to shoot with Hawk lenses, which are generally not affordable.” Except for the extreme weather – it was often very hot or rained heavily – the shoot was uneventful. “At one point, we were shooting an interior, it was 47 degrees Celsius,” says Oliver Schmitz. “We had to darken the windows and everyone was sweating like crazy. But except for that everything went very well. It isn’t like that on every shoot. But when it is, it’s very satisfying.” Shooting a film in South Africa, where he grew up, after being away for 10 years was a very interesting experience for Schmitz: “I actually noticed differences between working in Germany and South Africa,” he says, “where everything has to do a lot more with intuition. Plus in Berlin, I don’t think we’d have had access to the kind of talent we found in Elandsdoorn. What people here gave me was simply wonderful.”

DoP Bernhard Jasper couldn’t complain either: “The crew was great. The actors were amazing. It was a lot of fun. And I can’t say that for every film I’ve worked on.” Costume designer Nadia Kruger describes her stay in Elandsdoorn as memorable because, among other reasons, crime was not an issue: “If we had filmed in a township in Johannesburg we would have needed to be more alert and our safety would have always been an issue. I live in Johannesburg and I know that it is very, very dangerous there. It was downright idyllic here in comparison and simply beautiful.” But producer Oliver Stoltz admits that, in light of their tight budget, everyone had to “make do”: “But if you bring the right people along – most of them I’ve known for a long time – and everyone knows the parameters they have to work in, then it’s all doable. Economizing isn’t my thing. But I have a knack for figuring out where I have to spend money and where I don’t. In the case of LIFE, ABOVE ALL, it all worked out, not least because Oliver Schmitz and I think the same way and, having worked in TV, he’s used to dealing with tight budgets.”

In the past, Oliver Stoltz says, he had worked with directors who, he could tell, didn’t like the producer to be on the set. He’s not the type of producer, he explains, who gets involved in everything simply as a matter of principle. On the other hand he finds it vital to be present on the set frequently – it does, however, depend on the film. That he had to return to Berlin, right after

they had begun shooting LIFE, ABOVE ALL on location in Elandsdoorn, due to an illness, “wasn’t how I had imagined it. But I watched the dailies and I knew things were on a roll. With Oliver I didn’t have to worry. First of all we had worked closely together on the screenplay and secondly, we had similar ideas. Besides, Oliver was glad when I noticed something back in Germany, which he would have overlooked down there on the set.” Due to his illness Stoltz also had to give up his plan to shoot a 45-minute documentary about a little girl who he met while he was doing research at the Ndlovu Medical Center. The “real Chanda,” so to speak.

In closing, Stoltz points out that he and Schmitz didn’t intend to make a “film about victims” with LIFE, ABOVE ALL. “When my documentary “Lost Children” was playing, I was told I had made a well-intentioned film. On the other hand there were people who didn’t dare to critique the film because they thought it would have been inappropriate, considering the topic. But I think that’s wrong. In my opinion films and the stories they tell have to touch people emotionally first and foremost. If, in addition, they change people’s minds and help them change their behavior patterns, then that’s the greatest accomplishment of entertainment. Obviously, LIFE, ABOVE ALL does send a strong message about AIDS. But, first and foremost, it’s Chanda’s story about growing up. That’s what makes the film so gripping, so moving.”



CAST

Chanda Khomotso Manyaka
Lillian Lerato Mvelase
Mrs. Tafa Harriet Manamela
Esther Keabaka Makanyane
Jonah Aubrey Poolo

CREW

Director Oliver Schmitz
Screenplay Dennis Foon
Based on the novel „Chanda's Secrets“
by Allan Stratton
Producer Oliver Stoltz
Co-Producers Greig Buckle
Thomas Reisser
Dan Schlanger
Executive Producer Helge Sasse
Line Producer Martin Hämer
Associate Producer Daniela Ramin
DoP Bernhard Jasper
Music Ali N. Askin
Editor Dirk Grau
Sound Ivan Millborrow
Production Design Christiane Rothe
Costume Design Nadia Kruger
Make-Up Raine Edwards
Casting Director Moonyeenn Lee

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Title LIFE, ABOVE ALL
LE SECRET DE CHANDA
Production South Africa, Germany 2010
Length 105 min
Format HD and 35 mm, color
1:2.35, Dolby Digital

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

Stephen Lan
Cell +49-172-200-6686
Bberry Lan.Stephen@sympatico.ca

GERMAN PRESS

aim Conny Suhr, Simone Bachofner, Julia Bartelt
Cell +49-151-147 39 690
eMail Conny.Suhr@aim-pr.de
Simone.Bachofner@aim-pr.de
Julia.Bartelt@aim-pr.de

Senator Film Verleih Antje Pankow
Cell +49-170-767 7159
eMail a.pankow@senator.de

FRENCH PRESS

Matilde Incerti Hôtel Univers
2 rue du Maréchal Foch,
06400 Cannes
Phone +33-(0)4-9306 3000
eMail matilde.incerti@free.fr

WORLD SALES

BAVARIA FILM

INTERNATIONAL

Bavaria Media GmbH
Bavariafilmpfad 7 | Building 71
82031 Geiselgasteig | Germany
Phone +49-89-6499-2686
Fax +49-89-6499-3720
eMail international@bavaria-film.de
www.bavaria-film-international.com