

South Africa Heals Itself

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

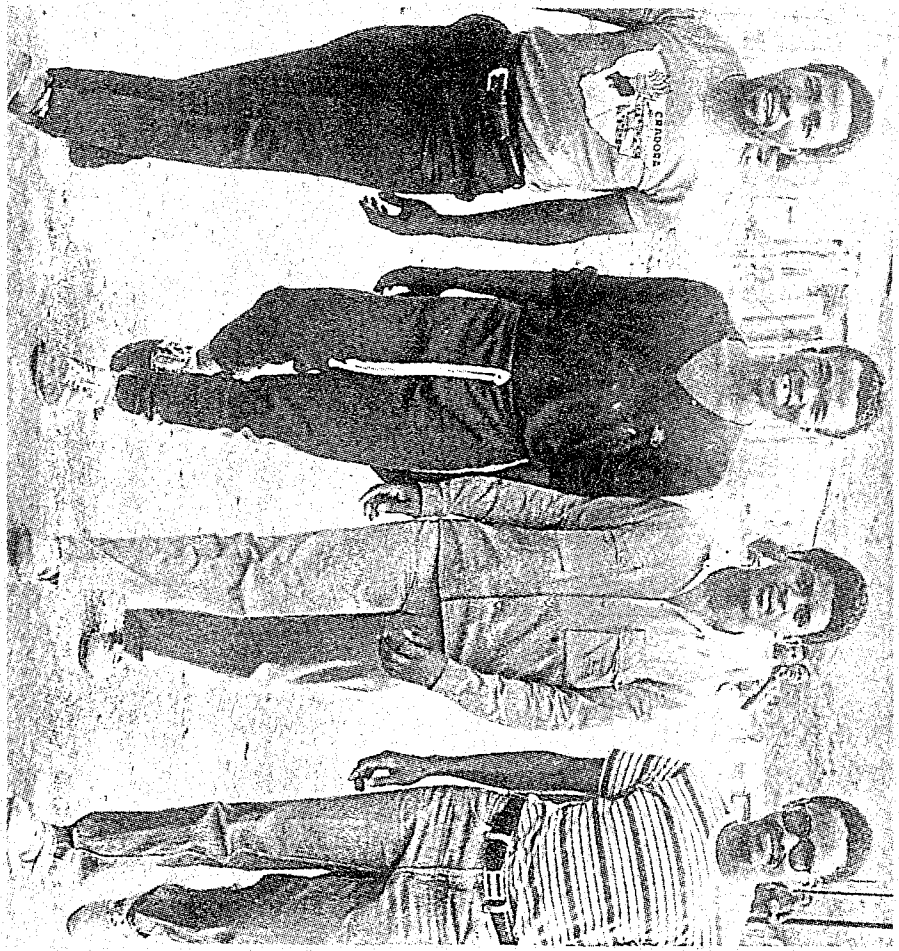
BY DENNIS LIM

LONG NIGHT'S JOURNEY INTO DAY

Directed by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann
At Film Forum Through April 11

Nursing the raw wounds of decades of institutionalized racism, the South African government in 1994 formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, allowing those who committed politically motivated crimes—both to uphold and to protest the country's apartheid regime—to step forward and apply for amnesty. The TRC operates on a case-by-case basis, and the painstaking, inevitably painful process assumes the form of public hearings—not so much trials as forums that bring together victims and perpetrators, reliving trauma in an act of communal catharsis. This unique judicial procedure derives meaning not merely from uncovered facts or unexpectedly pointed apologies, but from its extremely public nature. Broadcast live on radio, each session unfolds before a visibly emotional audience, often on a stage. As someone remarks in *Long Night's Journey Into Day*, Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann's documentary on the TRC, the surreal sense is of "an ancient, tragic play."

With four case studies, this Sundance prizewinner makes amply clear the infinite complications inherent in the TRC's mission. The film opens with a hearing that involves, for many Americans, the most well-known apartheid fatality, Amy Biehl, a Fulbright scholar who was murdered in Cape Town in 1993. Four years later, Peter and Linda Biehl testify before the TRC, determined to honor their daughter's humanitarian beliefs. Not only do the Biehls choose not to oppose the killers' amnesty applications, they request a meeting



THE "GRADDOCK 4," ANTI-APARTHEID ACTIVISTS WHO WERE KILLED IN 1985

with the family of Mongezi Manqina, the young man who fatally stabbed her. Establishing a best-case scenario with this remarkable, enor-

mously moving display of strength and compassion, the film goes on to show that absolute is, more frequently, far from forthcoming

(as is genuine contrition at times) and that each conciliatory attempt rests on a singular, unpredictable foundation of remorse and resentment. A white ex-security forces officer, Eric Taylor, says it was simply part of his job description when he assassinated Fort Calata, a rural anti-apartheid activist. Taylor expresses guilt and claims new perspective (which he attributes to Nelson Mandela's autobiography and—a detail so startling it takes a moment to fully register—the 1988 movie *Mississippi Burning*), but Calata's grieving widow, Nomonde, remains suspicious and unmoved. Robert McBride, an ANC freedom fighter who bombed a Durban bar, killing three white women, rues his native political fervor; but Sharon Welegemoed, the sister of one of the victims, is rankled by the cockiness she perceives in McBride's TRC testimony. *Long Night's Journey* saves its most intricate case for last, the 1986 "Gugulatu 7" incident, in which seven young black men were shot dead by police in an "anti-terrorist operation." Only two of the 25 officers involved have since applied for amnesty—one a white sergeant who denies that the victims were specifically targeted, the other a black government operative, Thapelo Mbeto, who admits he was assigned to entrap the men.

Maintaining a respectful distance (in every sense), Reid and Hoffmann's elegantly constructed documentary argues that the TRC, an unwieldy experiment in "restorative justice," is not only successful on its own terms, but desperately necessary—a conclusion that may surprise, not least because this model of therapeutic confrontation has been routinely cheapened by touchy-feely American talk shows over the years. Spare, direct, and devastatingly effective, the film puts fuzzy, big-word concepts like absolution and redemption into an agonizingly vivid context. When, at the end of the film, a distraught mother spontaneously forgives her son's killer, it's a heartbreaking, heartening moment that you count yourself fortunate to have witnessed. In more ways than can be said of most films, *Long Night's Journey Into Day* is essential viewing. **D**