

Wembley to Soweto showcases local photography talent



BRITISH actor David Westhead (*Mrs Brown*) came to South Africa eight years ago for a film project and immediately struck a chord with his driver, Ayanda "McCoy" Oniwe, who wanted to start his own company but didn't have the means. This instilled in David an overwhelming sense of wanting to give back, so he founded The Maakbet Project through his company Wilton Pictures, with the aim of training previously disadvantaged actors and filmmakers in the townships during the filmmaking process.

"I'm an actor and this was my way

to pass on what I know. *Maakbet* literally means *MacBeth*, only set in the townships," says David. The film was co-adapted by the late John Matshikiza and is being produced by Wilton Pictures (UK), Met Film (UK) and Out of Africa (SA). It is due to start filming in November 2010.

David wanted to make a difference in the indigenous film industry by training South African actors and crew so that co-productions no longer need to fly in their own people for a film. "I wanted to create real work. In South Africa it's about the meal and not the cutlery."

The Maakbet Project has transformed into something bigger and now encompasses several projects that serve the local community.

"Two years ago a friend of mine was filming in South Africa and couldn't find a single stills photographer in Johannesburg. I thought that was just insane," recalls David. As a result he founded Wembley to Soweto, an ambitious project aimed at training photographers from previously disadvantaged communities.

In 1988 photographer John Cole took an iconic photograph at Nelson Mandela's birthday celebration concert at Wembley Stadium. David sourced the image and presented it to his friend and colleague, Kweku Mandela, as a gift for the family. It now hangs in Madiba's home.

David wanted to redo the experience, this time at The Kick-Off Celebration Concert at Orlando Stadium in Soweto, which was also produced by Control Room's Kevin Wall. David invited John to come to South Africa to train local photographers.

"The project needed to tie in with the World Cup, so what I had in mind was two stadiums set 22 years apart. The link would be one family and one photographer. John asked me how much I was going to pay him and I said nothing. He agreed straight away," says David.

David said that everyone involved was instrumental to creating the project's legacy. Judy Robison from ConvergeSA put David in touch with the Soweto-based Umuzi Photo Club that trained young photographers. From that group, David found eight youngsters from Soweto, Hillbrow and Diepsloot that had a real chemistry. The CityVarsity in Newtown offered teaching facilities, Macs and some wonderful personnel. Tesco and Nikon came on board to donate cameras and Services SETA pledged a large donation to get the project off the ground.

"This was the first time in many years that a project had such a feel good vibe. Nobody wanted to know if there was money in it. They just wanted to get involved," says David.

The images will be exhibited at a 2011 event David is planning at The Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, England. There has also been a lot of interest from New York in America and Lisbon in Portugal.

David is planning on taking Wembley to Soweto to London in 2012 and Brazil in 2014. "This was supposed to be a once-off project but it's been so successful that we're going to run it annually."

Next up he will be working with British producer Kath Mattock and Razor Sharp Films' Rachel Young on six short films by previously disadvantaged filmmakers.