



Peccadillo Pictures Presents  
A Film by Oliver Schmitz

# LIFE ABOVE ALL



THE ~~GUARDIAN~~ TIMES  
BFI LONDON  
FILM FESTIVAL

Based on the best-selling novel “Chanda’s Secrets” by Allan Stratton

Cinema Release Date: 6 May 2011      Running Time: 105 mins      Cert: TBC

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## **SYNOPSIS**

When 12 year-old Chanda and her family learn of an unpleasant rumour that spreads through their village like wildfire, her mother is forced to seek refuge from the prejudice of her superstitious neighbours. Chanda soon begins to suspect, however, that things might not be as they seem: fearing for her mother's safety and unable to trust even those closest to her, she sets out on a journey to uncover the truth.

'Life, Above All' is a resonant and emotional 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 award-winning South African filmmaker Oliver Schmitz ("Mapantsula", "Paris, je t'aime"), it is based on the international best-selling novel "Chanda's Secrets" by Allan Stratton.

'Life, Above All' premiered in 2010 at the Cannes Film Festival in 'Un Certain Regard' followed by the BFI London Film Festival. It will play at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in March and will be released in UK cinemas on 6 May 2011.

## **THE NOVEL**

In April 2005 producer Oliver Stoltz attended hotDOCS-Festival in Toronto with 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. Stoltz and Stratton met during the festival for a first informal exchange of ideas and kept in touch, Stratton eventually sending Stoltz a draft of his book and 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. "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.

Author Allen Stratton tells us, "I wrote Chanda's Secrets 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."

Stoltz felt the book definitely went beyond the narrowly conceived topic of AIDS in Africa. "The prejudices and taboos in Germany are no different than they are in South Africa. What really inspired me in reading Stratton's book were the values it represents, 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 how 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 GENESIS**

It didn't take Oliver Stoltz long to make up his mind to turn "Chanda's Secrets" into a film. He had lived in South Africa and had been wanting to produce a film that was set there for a while. 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.

He had known 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, I shot for television in Germany more or less non-stop for the last eight years". Among his work are several successful and award-winning series, including "Turkish for Beginners" and "Doctor's Diary". Soon, however, he began to want to shoot 'at home' again, and when Allan Stratton's novel landed on his desk, he says "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.

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."

"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. We definitely didn't want a voiceover narration. We condensed the story 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." The fact that Chanda is three years younger in the film than in the book is a result of research that was conducted locally. The team realised 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 some 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 we could see where we needed to insert more reality. Every day we had research appointments and writing meetings," explains Stoltz. "In the western hemisphere people tend to generalise 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."

## **THE LOCATION**

For research purposes the threesome travelled to Elandsdoorn, a township located about 200 kilometres northeast of Johannesburg in the South African province of Mpumalanga, to visit the Ndlovu Medical Centre. Oliver Stoltz had heard from a colleague about the facility which was established in 1994 by Dutch physician Hugo Tempelman, a family practitioner, and his wife Liesje. 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 Centre 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 neighbour 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 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 Centre. “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, explains how contacts were made in Elandsdoorn: “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.”

Oliver Schmitz remembers that “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.”

## **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, 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 loneliness in that house. It was also helpful that I saw the houses of real neighbours 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 an emotional 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 centre, “and that was wonderful, because if he’d lost his calm, we 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 humour. 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.”

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. “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.”

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, 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 went smoothly. “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.”

DoP Bernhard Jasper adds: “The crew was great. The actors were amazing. It was a lot of fun.” 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.”

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 behaviour 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**

### **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 asked to participate in the casting for LIFE, ABOVE ALL and has turned out to be a natural actress. Chanda is her first role in front of the camera.

### **LERATO MVELASE – Lillian**

Lerato Mvelase was born in Soweto, South Africa in 1982. 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 in the successful series "Mzansi". She had to relinquish that role for the show's second season as her hosting duties on "Mindset Educational TV" (until 2005) demanded most of her time. Since 2005 Lerato Mvelase has played in 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 theatre 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 "Hijack Stories." She later worked alongside stars such as Don Cheadle, Juliette Binoche and Samuel L. Jackson in films such as "Hotel Rwanda" 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 theatre 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 theatre, 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 stages until he joined the South African State Theatre in Pretoria in 1999. There he met his mentor, the South African director Paul Grootboom. Aubrey Poolo has classical theatre training but also knows modern African dance including Gumboot Dance, Pantsula Dance and Kofifi.

## **CREW**

### **OLIVER SCHMITZ – Director**

Oliver Schmitz, the child of German immigrants, was born in 1960 in Cape Town, South Africa. After graduating from Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town, Schmitz began a two-year apprenticeship as an editor in Johannesburg, and in 1985 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 gained cult status. It debuted at the 1988 Cannes Film Festival in "Un Certain Regard" and in 2006 was named the best South African film of the decade at the South African Film and Television Awards. In the late 80s 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. With "increasingly longer waiting periods" between projects he moved to Germany that year, where he quickly made a name for himself as a 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. Schmitz, who lives in Berlin, is currently in production with a film 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. He produced numerous feature films, TV movies and documentary films, including "Knockin' On Heaven's Door", and also 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)**

LIFE, ABOVE ALL

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)

SALAMI ALEIKUM Ali Samadi Ahadi

### **DENNIS FOON – Screenwriter**

Dennis Foon, born in 1951 in Detroit, studied religion at the University of Michigan. Encouraged by friends and teachers, Foon devoted increasing time to his writing and once his first short story won an award he enrolled in creative writing at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. In 1974 he co-founded the Green Thumb Theatre, serving as its artistic director for the next twelve years, during which time he wrote a number of plays for children and adults. In 1987 Foon left Vancouver and worked 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. In 1996 he finished the youth portrait “Little Criminals,” which garnered him numerous awards, among them the coveted Gemini Award (Canadian Television Award) for best television drama. 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 was born in 1951 in Stratford, Canada. He studied English at the University of Toronto and after completing his MA, devoted his entire time to acting. All the while he continued to write and in 1977 his first play premiered in Vancouver. Stratton moved to New York in 1982, where he joined the legendary Actors’ Studio as a writer/director. In the late 80s he returned to Canada and in the mid 90s Stratton became the head of the theatre department at the Etobicoke School of the Arts, where he taught acting, directing and creative writing for stage and screen. 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’s body of work includes numerous feature, television films and commercials across various genres, including “Open Water 2: Adrift”, “Rock It!”, “Kleinruppin Forever”, and “KDD – Kriminaldauerdienst”. His work has garnered him numerous international awards, such as the London Advertising Festival and the New York Film Festival and nominations for the German Television Awards and the German Film Awards. 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”.

### **CAST**

Chanda - Khomotso Manyaka  
Lillian - Lerato Mvelase

Mrs. Tafa - Harriet Manamela  
Esther - Keabaka Makanyane  
Jonah - Aubrey Poolo

### **CREW**

Director - Oliver Schmitz  
Screenplay - Dennis Foon  
Producer - Oliver Stoltz  
Co-Producers - Greig Buckle; Thomas Reisser;  
Dan Schlanger  
Executive Producer - Helge Sasse  
Line Producer - Martin Hämer  
Associate Producer - Daniela Ramin

Director of Photography - 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