

Local documentary scores in New York

By Debashine Thangevelo

First-time documentary film-makers Lisa Henry and Shareen Anderson are on cloud nine. The duo recently bagged a bronze award for their documentary series, *Saving Soweto*, at The 53rd New York Festivals International Television and Film Awards.

The eight part documentary - a collaborative effort between Henry's Left Hand Films and Anderson's Fort Greene Filmworks - was commissioned by Al Jazeera English and has been broadcast twice on DStv.

Henry said the idea for *Saving Soweto* was born from stories friends and family, working at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, shared.

On getting approval to film at the biggest hospital in South Africa, and the world, Henry said: "We approached the CEO at the time for a few meetings. We had to convince them that we didn't want to do a shock-horror piece and that we were looking at walking in the shoes of the staff and find out why they choose to work there instead of anywhere else in the world."

Henry's and Anderson's compelling pitch got the nod. And in also getting the green light from Al Jazeera English, they set about making *Saving Soweto*, little realising the pull and impact of the documentary series.

"Filming a 24-hour shift was difficult. It wasn't easy watching people die. As both Shareen and I have children, we were concerned about putting ourselves at risk being around people with infectious diseases," she recalled.

Of course, not everyone was keen on the documentary airing.

"After the first episode, we were called in by the Gauteng Department of Health. They wanted the series off the air or for us to have it modified. We didn't want to; besides, Al Jazeera English owned the copyrights. After the series went out, a memo was sent to hospital staff informing them that they were not to talk to the media."

As for their win, an elated Henry commented: "It is thrilling for us as this is our directorial debut. It is also a vindication that we can make world-class television."

Encouraged by the success of *Saving Soweto*, Henry and Anderson are thinking of making an hour-long documentary on crime in South Africa.

"It is easy to sensationalise such a subject matter and that is why we decided to take a different approach. We are looking at how various communities view crime and how they are dealing with it.

"We are also hoping to tie in with Bheki Cele, National Police Commissioner, and his tackling of the issue."



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