

Movie review: 'Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem,' a 'Goodfellas' for South Africa

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The story of a township boy-turned-slumlord millionaire, "Gangster's Paradise: Jerusalem" is a South African crime epic with plenty of vigor, violence and vengeance, as one might expect from a rags-to-riches tale cut from the same cloth as "City of God," "Goodfellas" and "Scarface." But writer-director Ralph Ziman deserves props for his skewed take on private enterprise post-apartheid, when a bright, struggling man like Lucky Kunene (played by Jafta Mamabolo as a teen, Rapulana Seiphemo as an adult) can learn how to go from hijacking cars in Soweto to hijacking Johannesburg tenements from negligent white landowners.

It's a fresh idea, with a time-and-place-specific pungency — whether it's the gritty location photography by Nicolas Hofmeyer, or an Afrikaner cop's lament that too many years of white-authority abuse have hamstrung legitimate efforts to reduce crime — but the whole effort is undermined by an abundance of mob-movie cliches. And Ziman's such a leadfoot with the storytelling pedal that such things as character motivation, reflectiveness and basic logic get lost in the crackerjack pacing. It's a shame because some of his core cast — Seiphemo, Jeffrey Sekele as an underworld mentor, Ronnie Nyakale as

Lucky's childhood friend — have the kind of lived-in, expressive faces worth savoring amid the chases, threats and bloodshed.

-- Robert Abele

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