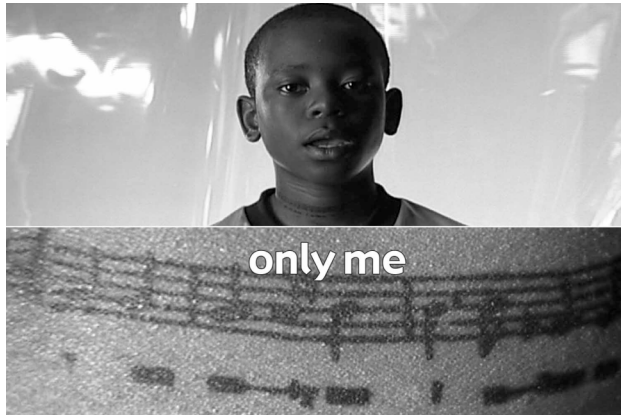


## PRESS KIT



# FIG TREES

## A DOCUMENTARY OPERA ABOUT PILLS, GERTRUDE STEIN & AIDS ACTIVISM

104 Min., HDcam, 2009

Writer/Director/Producer: John Greyson • Composer: David Wall

With: Van Abrahams, David Wall, Denise Williams, Deb Overes, Ezra Perlman, Alexander Chapman

DOPs: Ali Kazimi, Jesse Rosensweet • Design: Bill Layton • Editor: Jared Raab

Funded by the Canada Council for the Arts & the Ontario Arts Council.

### SHORT SYNOPSIS

FIG TREES is a documentary opera about the struggles of AIDS activists Tim McCaskell of Toronto and Zackie Achmat of Capetown, as they fight for access to treatment drugs. Featuring Gertrude Stein, a singing albino squirrel and St. Teresa of Avila, FIG TREES explores the meaning of pills, saints and activism.

### LONG SYNOPSIS

In 1999, South African AIDS activist Zackie Achmat went on a treatment strike, refusing to take his pills until they were widely available to all South Africans. This symbolic act became a cause celebre, helping build his group Treatment Action Campaign into a national movement -- yet with each passing month, Zackie grew sicker...

FIG TREES is a documentary opera about AIDS activists Tim McCaskell of Toronto and Zackie Achmat of Capetown as they fight for access to treatment drugs. Documentary interviews, speeches, press conferences and demonstrations are sampled, taken apart, and set to music, replayed this time as operatic scenes. A surreal fictional narrative is intercut with the stories of their struggles against government and the pharmaceutical industry. In this fictional world, Gertrude Stein decides to write a tragic opera about Tim and Zackie and their saint-like heroism. She kidnaps them, transports them to Niagara Falls, and forces them to sing a series of complicated avant-garde vocal compositions. However, when Zackie ends his treatment strike and starts taking his pills, Gertrude realizes that there will be no more tragedy, and thus, no more opera

FIG TREES performs musical and political inversion on the music and words of Gertrude Stein's 1934 avant-garde classic opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, singing it upside down and backwards. Using compositional techniques of chance, palindromes, and polyphony, FIG TREES finds points of political harmony and musical convergence in operatic and documentary sequences that profile the overlapping stories of various activists: Gugu Dlamini, Stephen Lewis, Simon Nkoli, and most of all, Tim and Zackie. Featuring in the supporting cast a singing albino squirrel, an amputee busker, a ghostly male soprano, and St. Teresa of Avila, FIG TREES tells the story of Zackie's treatment strike in song, and the larger story of the fight for pills on two continents, and across two decades, asking: what does it mean for us to sing about AIDS?

## BACKGROUND

FIG TREES began in 2001, when writer/director John Greyson and composer David Wall decided to write an opera about Zackie's treatment strike, and in the process, ask questions about the role of martyrs and heroes in the struggle against AIDS. Wall suggested that Gertrude Stein's famous 1934 opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* be used as a framing device and inspiration. Operatic scenes were written from documentary sources, and first presented as a series of eight video installations at Oakville Galleries in 2003. Over the next several years, different versions of this installation were presented in Kitchener, Whitehorse, and Vancouver, as well in the form of two 5-minute music videos for CBC 'Opening Night' and Bravo. In 2007, a feature version was shot, using the same actors and a series of new scenes, further elaborating these themes. Editing followed over the next year, culminating in the world premiere of *Fig Trees* at the Berlin Film Festival in February, 2009.

Personally involved in AIDS activism since 1987, Greyson has been making films and videos about AIDS activist issues for two decades. He has known both Achmat and McCaskell for many years, having interviewed McCaskell before for two 1989 documentaries about AIDS activism, and he has collaborated with Achmat's housemate Jack Lewis on the fiction feature *Proteus*. This documentary opera about of the global fight against AIDS echoes Greyson's earlier film *Zero Patience*, (1993), an outrageous post-modern musical about finger-pointing and AIDS bigotry. Like *Zero Patience*, *Fig Trees* seeks to use the medium of song in startling and unexpected ways, to capture the spirit and politics of AIDS activism.

## BIOS

Writer/Director John Greyson is a Toronto artist and activist, whose feature films include *Proteus*, *Un©ut*, *The Law of Enclosures*, the AIDS musical *Zero Patience*, and *Lilies*, which won four Genies including Best Film, while *The Making of Monsters* and *Urinal* both previously won Teddies at the Berlin Film Festival. Currently teaching film at York University, he writes and lectures extensively, is the co-editor of the anthology *Queer Looks*, and is active in various media collectives and collaborations, including *Rex Vs. Singh* and the Olive Project.

Composer/Singer (the role of Tim) David Wall is an acclaimed singer, composer and recording artist who has scored numerous award-winning feature documentaries, including *The Take* (Naomi Klein & Avi Lewis), and *Zero Degrees of Separation* (Elle Flanders). Having collaborated with notable artists such as Marilyn Lerner and Bruce Mao, he is also well known as the lead singer in *The Flying Bulgars Klezmer Band* and *The Bourbon Tabernacle Choir*.

DOP's Jesse Rosensweet and Ali Kazimi are celebrated filmmakers in their own right. Rosensweet's first film *The Stone of Folly* won best short at Cannes, while his unique stop motion film *Paradise* has likewise been widely acclaimed. Kazimi's celebrated activist feature documentaries include the award-winning *Narmada: A Valley Rises* and *Continuous Journey*, about the notorious 1914 case of several hundred South Asian immigrants held hostage in Vancouver harbour by immigration authorities.

Singer Van Abrahams (the role of Zackie) is an acclaimed tenor of South African descent who grew up in Montreal. He has sung in operas and in concert in Canada and internationally, including the lead in *Beatrice Chancy* with the Edmonton Opera, roles in operas in Vienna, Mexico, New York, Cape Town, and the Mexican National Opera, the Leiderkranz Opera, and the Canadian Opera Company

Editor Jared Raab is an accomplished editor and short-film director, whose titles include *Viva Jopo* (which won best cinematography from the Canadian Society of Cinematographers) and *Jew-Boy*. He also shoots and produces the cult comedy web-series *Nirvana the Band the Show*.

## CAST

Zackie Achmat	Van Abrahams
Tim McCaskell	David Wall
Gertrude Stein	Deborah Overes
St. Martin	Ezra Perlman
St. Teresa of Avila	Denise Williams
Virgil Thomson	Ian Funk, Jesse Nishita
St. Peregrine	Mark Hartmeier
St. Caesura	Stephen Chen
Christopher Moraka	Justin Bacchus
Nkosi Johnson	Ashton Williams
Translator	Stephen McClare
Thabo/Manto/Rat	Jennifer Moore
Jack Lewis	Richard Fung

## CREW

Writer/Director/Producer	John Greyson
Composer	David Wall
Production Manager	Damion Nurse, Elle Nanes
Locations/Unit	Jared Raab
1st AD	Armen Kazazian, Warren Wilensky
2nd AD	Alyson Richards
3rd AD	Ian Paul, Matt Hotson
Script Supervisor	Yaz Rabadi
DOP	Ali Kazimi, Jesse Rosensweet
2nd Camera	Monika Gaudet, Frances Lai
Camera Assistant	Craig Cooper, Mehran Jabbari
Gaffer	Bernard Sequoin, Eduardo Sarimento Jr.
Key Grip	Barclay John Maude, Wilkin Chau
Best	Steve Chellis, Cavan Campbell
Electrics	Alejandro Munoz, Dean Dallas Bentley
Grips	Adam Crosby
Production Designer	Bill Layton, Danny Buchannan
Props, Art Assistant	Alex Bowes, David Frankovich, Mayuko Ueada, Caitlin Steppen
Sound Recordist	Shawn Kirby, Mike Filiappov
Production Assistants	Amy Armstrong
Craft Coordinator	Chris Wiseman
Hair/Makeup	Sylvie Mazerole, Lily Champniss
Costume & Wardrobe	Carolyn Rohaly, Elaine Robertson, Liliana Brusic, Caitlin Watson
Editor	Jared Raab

## CONTACT

John Greyson at Greyzone Productions: 647-272-0386 [johngreyzone@gmail.com](mailto:johngreyzone@gmail.com)