



# Starring role

A Hollywood blockbuster has put interpreters in the limelight. **Anita Chaudhuri** checks out the plot

**T**he job of UN interpreter is stressful enough – one ill-chosen word could provoke an international crisis – without the added complication of getting personally involved in the information being exchanged between superpowers. ‘No, no, you cannot be serious... someone will die if you do that...’ is not necessarily a recipe for an interpreter to enjoy a long career.

Yet this is the storyline of a new Hollywood blockbuster, *The Interpreter*, starring Nicole Kidman and Sean Penn and filmed inside the corridors of power at the UN’s Manhattan headquarters. Kidman plays the title role of a highly trained African-born interpreter, Silvia Broome, who hears a secret so incendiary, so threatening to the world, that she feels a moral responsibility to breach UN confidentiality. In the movie, Kidman overhears a killer’s plan to assassinate an African head of state, spoken in a rare dialect that few people other than her can understand. Her life is turned upside down when, by revealing the secret, she becomes the hunted target of international killers.

The concept for *The Interpreter* first emerged from the imaginations of producer Eric Fellner and Tim Bevan of production company Working Title Films. They wanted to set a story inside the realm of international diplomacy, where one person’s actions – or words, for that matter – can impact people on the other side of the globe. Recalls Bevan, ‘Eric and I initially had the idea years ago of an interpreter, of someone who exists in

this rarified world of statesmen and politicians, who suddenly finds herself through accidental circumstances in the position of being able to change the course of something that is going to happen in the world. The idea never went away and it became increasingly relevant.’

Immersing herself in the role, Kidman sat in anonymously on UN Security Council meetings, met with many real-life interpreters and worked closely with them to create an authentic representation of the profession. Like most UN interpreters, Silvia Broome speaks the minimum three languages fluently, and another two besides, and in common with many, has a ‘good ear’ that manifests in a talent for music.

*The Interpreter* is set in the fictitious African country of Matobo in the vicinity of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Screenwriter Charles Randolph imagined an entire political reality for the made-up country, based on Southern Africa’s modern history, involving post-colonial struggles, warring tribal factions and institutionalised corruption.

For greater authenticity, the



**Above: Nicole Kidman had to cope with three languages for the film**

**Top and below: the UN headquarters; this is the first time filming for a movie has been allowed inside the building**



producers teamed up with the Centre for African Studies at the University of London to create an imaginary language for Matobo named Ku, that would sound entirely real to most ears. Says director Sydney Pollack: ‘We worked with a professor to develop a tongue that’s a cross between Swahili and Shona, two common African languages in Eastern and Southern Africa. This new language, Ku, has elements of both of those languages, along with a number of unique elements... and somehow Nicole Kidman was able to become fluent in this tongue that doesn’t truly exist.’

Dialect coach Tim Monich had to coach Kidman in speaking this complex new language. ‘Nicole faced a huge challenge as an actress,’ Monich notes. ‘After all, Silvia’s supposed to be speaking this language fluently, so she had to find a way to do it without any hesitation, as if it’s totally natural to her, even though it doesn’t really exist, and then she had to be able to move back and forth between speaking English and Ku without missing a beat. That’s terribly, terribly difficult to ask of anyone, even the very best linguists.’

‘Luckily, Nicole turned out to have a fantastic ear,’ he continues. ‘She’s brilliant with accents. And she works so hard. It’s the best combination you can ask for. For this film she not only had to learn Ku, but also to practice Spanish and French. She coped with them all, just as Silvia Broome has done, which helped to create a very immediate emotional reality that really takes you into Silvia’s world, both the light and the dark sides of it.’

*The Interpreter* makes cinematic history by being the first movie ever to be filmed inside the top-security confines of the UN headquarters in New York. Even Alfred Hitchcock was turned down when he begged to shoot scenes of the classic *North By Northwest* inside – he had to resort to mocking up the UN’s famous visitors’ lounge for his set. But director Sydney Pollack was determined and eventually, through speaking to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, he gained unprecedented access. Even if the premise of the movie seems far-fetched to seasoned occupants of the soundproofed booths, the film certainly does reveal a glimpse of the world’s power structure never before seen on screen. *The Interpreter* is on general release from 15 April.