

The Girl from St Agnes is now streaming on Showmax

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"At St Agnes, the only saint is in the name"



You can now binge all eight episodes of *The Girl from St Agnes*, Showmax's critically acclaimed first Original Drama, which *Quartz* describes as "the kind of story that makes viewers want to click 'continue watching' at 3am and talk about it at work the next day."

At St Agnes, a prestigious all-girls boarding school in the Midlands, a popular student is found dead at the base of the old mill. Fearful of the scandal it might cause, the school is quick to declare the death of Lexi Summerveld (Jane de Wet) a tragic accident. But drama teacher Kate Ballard (Nina Milner) doesn't believe it. The more she investigates, the more Kate realises that she didn't really know Lexi or the school at all. Behind the imposing walls of St Agnes, Lexi's killer won't be the only person exposed...

The gripping murder mystery is a rare series commissioned, produced, written, directed and largely edited by women. Candice Fanguero, Showmax's head of content, was commissioning editor; Harriet Gavshon, Quizzical Pictures' managing director, was the producer; 2018 SAFTA winner Catharine Cooke and 2017 SAFTA nominee Cindy Lee are the co-directors; five-time SAFTA winner Gillian Breslin is the head writer; and Aluta Mlisana, Marcelle Mouton, Natalie Varoy, Melanie Jankes Golden, and Mmapula Letsoalo make up five of the six editors. To put that in context, some of the cast, like Celeste Khumalo, had never worked with a female director before...

Zakeeya Patel - who plays Sharon, the school matron - believes you'll feel the impact of this female gaze. "I'm a raging feminist, so I loved the fact that it's a female-driven story - one of the few. All the women have agency and are three-dimensional characters. Whether they're antagonists or protagonists, they are light and dark, they have shades, they are nuanced. This particular show has such beautiful arcs for women. That for me is revolutionary."

While Cindy is quick to point out that *The Girl from St Agnes* is first and foremost a "murder mystery drama that keeps you in suspense for eight hours," Catharine adds that it's also an investigation into "toxic masculinity, where it comes from and how it's either consciously or unconsciously enforced. It's about a history of violence that is taught within families and school environments, passed down from fathers to sons and reinforced at school among peers. It's also about how women

respond to violent environments, as teenagers, as mothers and as teachers.”

As part of their research, the filmmakers spoke to a range of private school students - black and white, girls and boys. “We listened and we heard and we tried to put all of their hurt and relevant issues into this show,” says Catharine. “These are real issues the kids are facing in private schools, from the politics about black girls’ hair to how important social media has become to children and how it can be so damaging.”

She’s quick to add, “These issues aren’t just in private schools; they are universal. The difference is just that with the money involved, they try hide things more at private schools...”

Celeste Khumalo, who plays head girl Kholwa, agrees. “It’s a diverse cast and I’ve learnt about situations that white families face, and how white families would work around certain issues and get away with things. It’s eye-opening in that we have many of the same problems - but the way we deal with certain problems, it’s different...”

For Cindy, the story felt close to home. “I went to a prestigious all-girls boarding school in Grahamstown. Even though I ended up being deputy head girl, there was a time where I was bullied. And I’m also gay. So I could relate to the story on quite a few levels as these are some of the themes of the show.”

She says working with Showmax means they didn’t have to tiptoe around the issues. “I really love that nothing is out of bounds with Showmax. I have sex scenes. I have swearing. I have nudity. I was like, ‘Really? I can direct all of this?’ Showmax just let us go for it; no one is holding back.”

Ultimately, though, *The Girl from St Agnes* will be judged as a whodunnit and by whether the audience can guess who killed Lexi Summerveld before episode eight. Early reviews of the first two episodes sent to South African media are overwhelmingly positive: *Htxt* wrote, “*The Girl from St Agnes* has its hooks in us and we want more...”; *Critical Hit* echoed, “Who knew the Midlands, with its lush green pastoral backdrops, could have this much killer intrigue?”; *The South African* added, “The story keeps you at the edge of your seat... Unlike anything you have seen on South African television... A truly binge-able experience...” and Brent Lindeque from *Good Things Guy* tweeted it was “brilliant, bracing and completely binge-worthy! This may be one of the best productions South African has ever seen.”

As Jane, who plays the dead girl Lexi, says, “I think what makes *The Girl from St Agnes* so powerful is that it manages to weave these topics into an entertaining storyline, making it not only accessible for a much wider audience, but also more digestible. It’s relevant. It’s topical. It’s gripping. It’s what South Africa needs.”

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