The film “Tsotsi”

Tsotsi is an award-winning film (best foreign language film at the Academy Awards 2005) with a cast of unknowns. The title role is played by Presley Chweneyagae. This is a genre film about life today in the South African ‘townships’ (slums) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsotsi. In some ways it is analogous to the award-winning genre film last year: Slumdog Millionaire. The movie is based the novel of the same name by Athol Fugard, an award winning South African playwright: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athol_Fugard. [Incidentally Fugards has a special relationship with New Havens’s Longwarf Theater, where his plays regularly premiere, most recently in November 2009]. Tsotsi takes place in current day Soweto, the largest township (900,000+ inhabitants) outside Johannesburg: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soweto (Find out what Soweto means.) It provides a vivid picture of the hardscrabble urban live that many Black Africans suffer today in the South African townships, the randomness of life there and and the slim chance one faces of escaping the grinding cycle of poverty. The film tells the story of Tsotsi, a young street criminal who steals a car only to discover a baby in the back seat. At this point you will get brief, contrasting glimpse of middle-class life in South Africa today. The story then tells how Tsotsi deals with these events of his life in the township over the following few days, with flashbacks to his early days as a street kid. You will find the ending of the film to be ambiguous.

The film is multi-lingual with bits of Zulu, Xhosa, Setswana, Sesotho, English and Afrikaans all mixed together. In addition you hear throughout the urban street or gangster Pidgin (Creole) language called Tsotsitaal which is an obvious play on the films title: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsotsitaal. Tsotsi is a Sesotho slang word for a "thug" or "robber", and taal is Afrikaans for language. Tsotsitaal (otherwise know as Iscamtho) developed as a gangsta pidgin during the 1940s and 50s (or earlier). As a Pidgin it evolved as a means of communications in urban areas between people from different language groups to become the hip urban language it is today. Tsotsitaal incorporated a number of different languages including Afrikaans and English, plus various African (Bantu) languages (see below) but the grammar is based on Bantu languages (particularly Zulu and Sesotho). Dialects of Tsotsitaal varied across different townships and regions with different ethnic compositions and different setting (e.g. prisons vs. mines vs. hip street language). Tsotsitaal is now a generic term for any of the quickly-evolving, mixed, street languages commonly used in South African Townships today. New words and phrases are continually being introduced

Since this film is so multilingual, it is worth noting that there are 11 official languages in South Africa: Afrikaans, English, IsiNdebele, IsiXhosa, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, SiSwat, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga, and a number more that are not official, including Nama, San, plus several South Asian, and other European languages as well as Tsotsitaal and Iscamtho. Check out http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/language.htm for more details. Which language is most widespread and which one is spoken by most people in South Africa today? Interesting, most of the Black African languages are similar enough so that if you know one language you can often figure out what someone is saying in another. But there are exceptions. For example, Tshivenda is quite different from the others.

You will also hear much of the urban music popular in the Townships today. This music is generically called Kwaito http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kwaito which developed in the 1990s, and its artists came to embrace the use of Tsotsitaal in the music’s lyrics. See if you can find and listen to some of Kwaito’s more well-known artists via the web.