



FAMILY TIES: The Laing Family – Sannie (Alice Krige), young Sandra (Ella Ramangwane) and Abraham (Sam Neill) in *Skin*.

MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

ATIYAH KHAN

SKIN is a controversial film which tells the true story of Sandra Laing, a girl born in the 1950s to white Afrikaner parents, but who was classified black under apartheid because she displayed the physical attributes of a coloured person.

The film screens at the TriContinental Film Festival on Wednesday in Joburg and Heritage Day (September 24) in Cape Town.

Psychiatrist and analytical psychologist Dr Ian McCallum will facilitate a workshop on September 28, organised by the Africa Genome Education Institute's Teaching of Biology Programme. The programme will bring together biology school teachers from across the country, who will discuss the film's relevance in today's society from the perspective of evolutionary biology.

One's initial thought about Laing's case is "impossible!"

In the film, it is referred to as a derogatory "genetic throwback" but in truth it is a kind of polygenetic inheritance.

"These genes exist in a lot of people. And it's really a 'genetic

expression'," said McCallum.

"If you look at the DNA profile of our Bushman, many of them have traces of European blood, which tells you that in the migrations in and out of Africa there have been offspring as a result of interbreeding among different racial groups.

"If you do have that kind of history, then it is possible that somewhere along the line there will be an expression of that particular gene, which will say, 'Hey, there's an interesting signature of your past history'."

McCallum is interested in evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology and how the two are linked.

"One of the beauties of evolutionary thinking is that it encourages a far better degree of compassion, not only for creatures, but for other human beings, when you realise that we are all part of the same web of life."

The film shows what apartheid was like, but also looks at the psychological anguish Laing had to endure of being classified as white and black at different times.

McCallum says: "When I first saw her, my feeling was 'Oh, there's going to be trouble here', since I know how

the apartheid government would have reacted to such a situation.

"The genetic issue is that these genes do express themselves in this way. This does happen and therefore you do not judge a person simply by the colour of their skin," he said.

"The impact on her as a child was intense isolation, rejection, displacement and the loss of one of the deepest human needs, which is to belong. This type of case wasn't that common during apartheid."

"I don't think anyone can overcome those kinds of wounds, deep wounds of rejection and abandonment.

"However, you learn to grow from them and the wounds get a bit smaller."

He believes the film is relevant when reviewing the concept of apartheid. "It's been around for a long time and it was not invented by South Africa.

"Apartheid is really another way of describing an important survival biological phenomenon called 'kinship recognition', which is intimately linked to a 'sense of belonging', which is linked to 'who you can trust'."

In sociological terms, kinship recognition was important for the

preservation of culture, belief system and value systems, McCallum explained.

"Which means you have formed an ingroup of people who speak the same language and who often look the same. The moment you have an ingroup, there is automatically an outgroup.

"When you identify with being an outgroup member, it doesn't take long to feel inferior, inadequate, useless.

"If an ingroup feels insecure, the outgroup gets the blame – it's the same with xenophobia.

"With the realisation that ingroups will never go away, you have to learn how to say 'no' to the damaging effects of turning the outgroups into enemies and targets of frustration."

He thinks *Skin* can help people understand the agony others have endured because they were regarded as members of the outgroup. "As we become aware of our biological history and how we've evolved as a species, my feeling is that we ought to know what the word tolerance really means, from a deep understanding of our ancestry."

● *Skin* plays September 24 at 6pm and Sunday, September 27 at 8pm.

