

Starry Night



Our short film took to the streets of Joburg in May 2016.



**Starry Night is a short film that Nick and I co-wrote - and that Nick directed.**

It began with an idea... about artists, about creativity, and about the fine line between brilliance and self-destruction. The concept was inspired by “The 27 Club” ... that ominous collective of artists, musicians, and actors who burned out and died before the age of 27.

After watching a deeply moving (and very sad) documentary about Amy Winehouse, Nick and I started talking about why so many artists - across genres - seem to burn out or self-destruct, especially when they're catapulted to sudden fame. Out of those late-night conversations, Starry Night was born.

Our film became a quiet homage to those artists.

## THE CONCEPT

Every word spoken in Starry Night comes from real artists who are no longer with us. We'd collected words, quotes, and even excerpts from letters and interviews... from Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and others... and wove them together into the film's dialogue.

In that way, Starry Night became a kind of collage - a tapestry of voices.

The film is also filled with easter eggs. For those who know art, music, or pop culture, there are tributes hidden in almost every frame. They're not always obvious - they appear in tattoos, graffiti, wardrobe details, paintings in the background, even the objects on the set. Each one is a subtle nod to an artist, poet, musician, or actor who left too soon.

Starry Night isn't a literal story... it's more like a dream, or a reflection. It's a film about the price of brilliance, about what fame and expectation can do to a creative soul.

“The best people possess a feeling for beauty, the courage to take risks,  
the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity for sacrifice.  
Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable.  
They are often wounded... sometimes destroyed”

- Ernest Hemingway -



## THE LATE, GREAT JAMES ALEXANDER

Our lead actor was one of our dearest friends, James Alexander, and his involvement made the project even more special.

James brought a remarkable depth to the role... and, heartbreakingly, *Starry Night* would later take on an entirely different meaning after his death. Although he didn't die by overdose or suicide (as many of the artists our film honoured had), James lost his life to cancer just a few years later.

Watching the film now is bittersweet. On one hand, I feel immense gratitude that we had that creative time together; on the other, I still feel the ache of losing him far too soon.

When we filmed *Starry Night*, James hadn't yet been diagnosed with cancer. I took a series of photos of him "dead" for the artwork I was creating... and now, when I look back at those images, there's this haunting sense of disbelief. None of us knew how little time he had left. Just a few years later, we were standing at his hospice bedside, saying our final goodbyes.



JAMES ALEXANDER

8th January 1978 - 23th April 2023



## HELENA SPRING

*Starry Night* came to life thanks to the support of Helena Spring, a producer Nick had worked with for many years. Helena wanted to give Nick the opportunity to show his *directing* abilities (not just his well-established editing skills) and she was the one who arranged funding for the film.

As producers do, Helena (and her logistical wizard, Gill Pearson) handled all the "business" of filmmaking: fundraising, hiring crew, managing contracts, paying salaries, organising catering, securing permissions for locations, and sourcing equipment and making sure that deadlines are met and promises are kept. It's a tough job - and in the film industry, producers are usually the highest-paid members of the team, which (in my view) is entirely warranted.

I've never wanted to be a producer - as in: embroil myself in the *business* of film. I admire what they do; the multi-taking, the money-management, the decision-making, the ability to pull all the threads together (often under pressure)... but it's not where *my* strengths lie. My focus has (and always will be) on the *creative* side of filmmaking.

I've also heard too many horror stories over the years about producers who aren't creatives, yet impose their preferences on the storytelling process. That kind of meddling makes me cringe.

Helena, however, is different. She's that rare combination of business savvy and creative instinct. She *understands story* (she's written screenplays herself) and she has decades of experience behind her. She's the kind of producer you want on your side: pragmatic but also deeply respectful of the creative process. I would work with her again in a heartbeat.

## COLLABORATION & CO-DIRECTING

In filmmaking, producers handle logistics while directors shape the creative vision. On big productions, there's often an entire team of creatives steering the ship... but with *Starry Night*, it was just Nick and me, building it from the ground up.

Nick officially directed the film, though in truth, I worked alongside him in a Creative Director capacity - even if the credits don't say so. We developed every aspect together: from story and tone to the visual world and design.



## THE ARTWORK

As part of my role, I created the couple's home - the living space of two artists: the musician (James's character) and his wife (played by Tessa Jubber), who is a painter. Their home needed to feel real... creative, slightly chaotic, filled with colour, texture, and art.

At the time, I hadn't painted in decades. Somewhere along the way, I'd convinced myself I wasn't a "real" artist and I'd stopped painting entirely, focusing instead on building my graphic design business and other ventures.

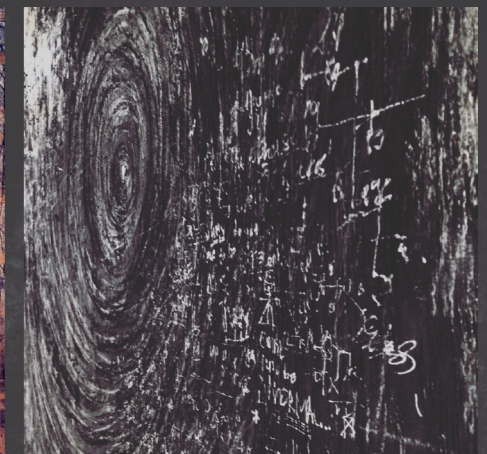
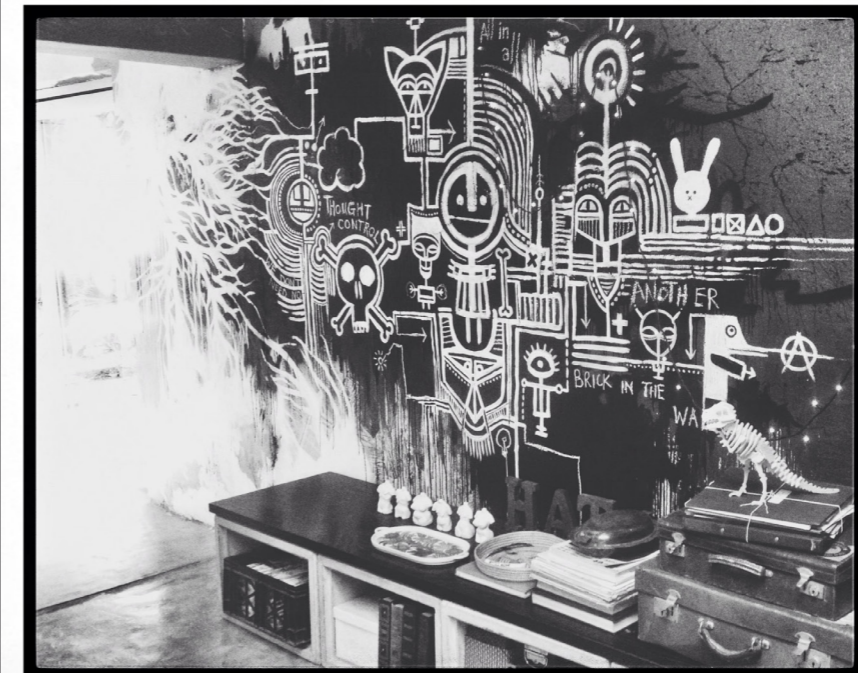
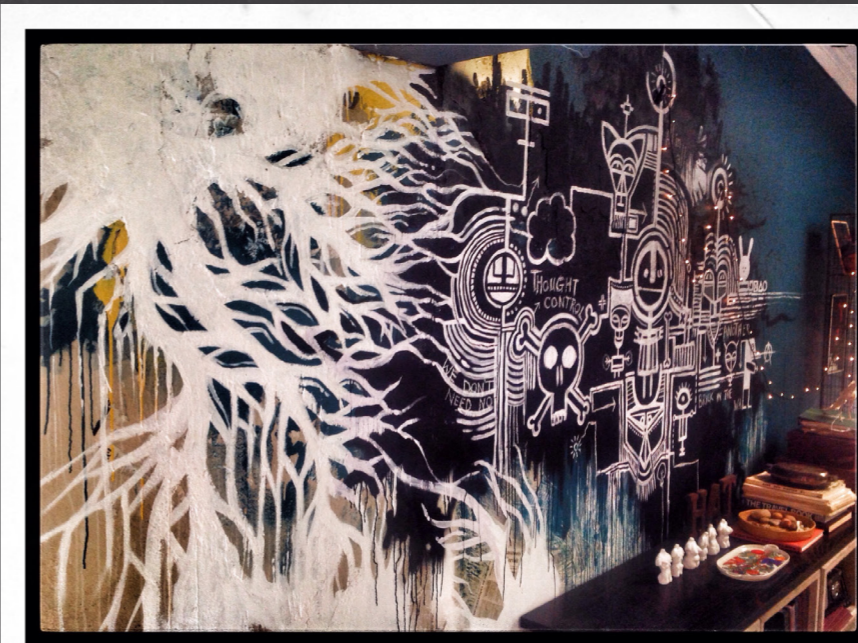
When I started creating artwork for Tessa's character, I decided she'd be an abstract painter, working large-scale and intuitively. I began painting for *her*... gathering paints, canvases, bits of wood... and something unexpected happened.

As soon as I started painting again, something inside me switched on. It was as though I'd reawakened a long-dormant part of myself. The process was freeing, raw, and deeply emotional. I realised, with something like shock, how much I'd missed it... how much I'd stifled that part of me.

Starry Night unlocked the artist in me. Since then, I've been painting and drawing almost obsessively, as if trying to make up for lost time.



More messy artwork I created for Starry Night and what my hands looked like afterwards...



Some of the messy artwork I created for Starry Night (including the wall-art). The art on the bass guitar features another 'easter egg' along with my own scribbles & doodles. The giant messy "traitor" wall art was painted on the back of an old door. The words are from one of the songs I'd written for the film.

## THE PAINTING OF JAMES

One of the artworks I created for the film was a collage-painting of James — half painted, half photographic — on wood. It depicted his character in two mirrored forms: one angelic, one inverted, representing decay and death.

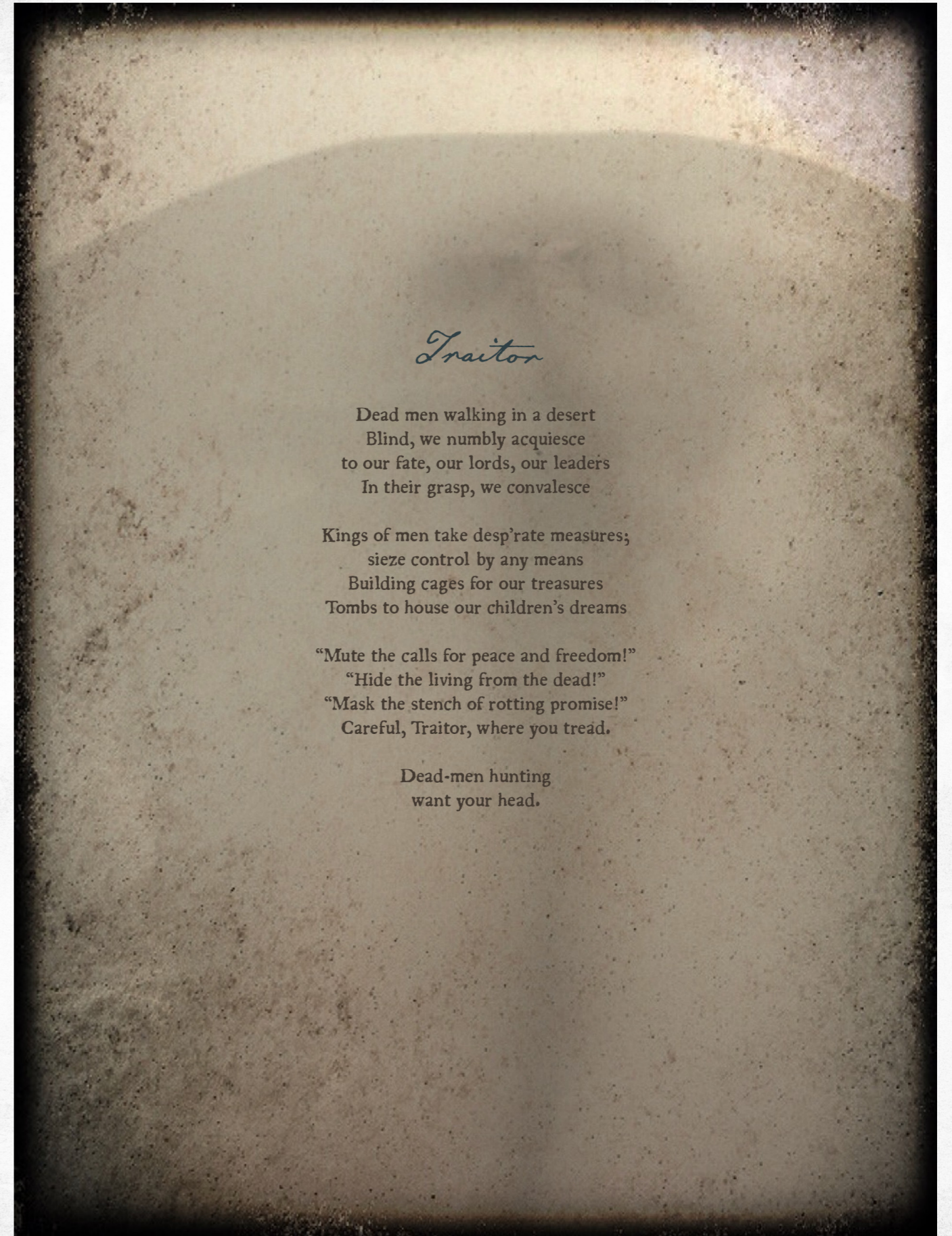
It was the first piece of art I ever sold. Helena offered to buy it, completely surprising me (nobody had ever asked to buy my work before). She offered a generous fee, and years later, after James's passing, she gave the artwork to his widow, Anel.

Understandably, it's not an easy piece to hang in one's home - it's heavy with symbolism, depicting James's character as both saint and fallen figure - so eventually, the artwork found its way back to me.

I keep it now as a deeply sentimental reminder: of the film that changed me, the friend who inspired me, and the creative reawakening that started it all.



I shot the photo (on the left) of James to use as a reference photo for the artwork I later created (below).



### *Traitor*

Dead men walking in a desert  
Blind, we numbly acquiesce  
to our fate, our lords, our leaders  
In their grasp, we convalesce

Kings of men take desp'rate measures;  
sieze control by any means  
Building cages for our treasures  
Tombs to house our children's dreams

"Mute the calls for peace and freedom!"  
"Hide the living from the dead!"  
"Mask the stench of rotting promise!"  
Careful, Traitor, where you tread.

Dead-men hunting  
want your head.

One of the poems (partly adapted into a song) that I wrote for *Starry Night*.  
The "careful traitor" line was repeated on the large artwork I created for the home of the two artists.

like a flower, they'll cut you and keep you confined  
as a decorative jewel for the crowns of the blind  
you're a temporary fragrance to mask their decay  
and they'll drink from your beauty and throw you away

'cause that's what they do, and that's how it's done  
they'll tell you to take it and they'll fuck you for fun  
and they'll throw you some coin, so you stay in their debt  
and numb you with poison to help you forget

and you beat yourself bloody for not being strong  
and you master the art of just playing along  
and you cut out your heart, 'cause you don't want to feel  
and you put on a mask and pretend that it's real

'cause that's what they do, and that's how it's done  
they'll tell you they love you, then they'll fuck you for fun.

- For Amy & Marilyn -  
by Heather Costaras 2016

## WHY STARRY NIGHT WAS LIFE-CHANGING

Looking back, Starry Night will always hold a special place in my heart... for many reasons.

It was the first project Nick and I co-created, and it marked the beginning of our creative partnership. It was also the project that reawakened the artist in me... the part of myself I'd buried for *far* too long.

And, of course, it's tied forever to James - his talent, his friendship, and his light.

Whenever I revisit Starry Night, I'm reminded of all those things: the magic of collaboration, the fragility of life, and the healing power of creativity.



A page from the Starry Night "Bible" I created.  
James told me that this was one of his favourite quotes.  
It means: "To *be*... rather than *to seem*".

Another poem I wrote for Starry Night which was also adapted into a song. The song (at the beginning of the film) is based on this poem... the chorus: "They'll tell you they love you, then they'll fuck you for fun..."