



# HOLLYWOOD HEAVYWEIGHTS

Swoon over SA's skills

By Katie Reynolds



MaryAnn Hughes from Walt Disney Studios, Nils Flaatten, CEO of Wesgro, and Marvin Savin, CFO of Moonlighting Films

**B**rand South Africa and other national and provincial partners including Wesgro, the official tourism, trade and investment promotion agency for the Western Cape, brought four top Hollywood film executives to South Africa's shores for what is known as a 'familiarisation' trip. The group comprised Vance van Petten, Executive Director of the Producers Guild of America; MaryAnn Hughes, Vice President, Film and Television Production Planning at Disney; Sara Spring, Senior Vice President of Feature Production at Paramount; and Kate Beyda, Senior Vice-President of Physical Production at Warner Bros. The purpose of this trip was to showcase the country's talent, locations, skills and attractive financial incentives to industry heavyweights, with the intention of attracting more film productions from the major movie studios and independent producers. But did it work? Katie Reynolds, Editor of The Filmmaker's Guide to Africa

and The Callsheet, sat down with the executives for an in-depth talk about their experiences. Nils Flaatten, CEO of Wesgro, as well as Nico Dekker, CEO of Cape Town Film Studios, provided insight into the country's film sector, and the promising outcomes that will result from the executives' visit.

## What were your expectations for this trip?

**MaryAnn Hughes:** "I came here to meet with government officials and representatives from the Department of Trade and Industry (dti), the NFVF, and various film commissioners to talk about incentives and doing things that would help to further the relationships and partnerships between the industry and government. We've started dialogue about tapping into working with tourism and doing cross-marketing, and so I leave here feeling that we really have started that partnership."

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**Sara Spring:** "I really just came here to see how viable it was, from a creative standpoint in terms of locations as well as a production standpoint like crew, facilities or level of crew expertise."

**Kate Beyda:** "I wanted to see physical production facilities and locations, as well as creative aspects."

**Vance Van Petten:** "My expectations were quite high when I arrived here, because two of my producers both produced films here (Invictus and Blood Diamond). They told me that they were exceptionally impressed with South Africa."

## What are the key competitive advantages that South Africa has over other locales?

**Kate Beyda:** "The depth of skills that the crew have here is incredibly attractive, and in my mind, a competitive advantage over other countries. The fact that there is no



Sara Spring from Paramount Pictures, Kate Beyda from Warner Bros, MaryAnn Hughes from Walt Disney Studios, and Vance Van Petten from the Producers Guild of America

language barrier is another great advantage. South Africa is simply a premier filmmaking country. Everything we saw in Johannesburg and Cape Town, including the incredible Cape Town Film Studios, was tremendous. Every hotel we stayed in was gorgeous. I would have no trouble bringing high-profile cast here, I actually think it would be an attractive location for high-profile cast. It was just terrific on every level."

**Vance Van Petten:** "The support system that has been set up with the government, the dti and Wesgro is exceptional in that everyone is so invested. In America we don't have the same support from our government officials. You have direct personal and financial investment in building an industry. In California we have taken it for granted, and we are losing production. The commitment you have from all levels of government is truly astounding."

## Were your expectations met?

**Sara Spring:** "I have a number of projects that could possibly shoot here, and I'm sure I'll have more in the future as well. I have to say that my expectations were more than met. We had the opportunity to go to the CTFS and they are state-of-the-art, and the level of craftsmanship on top of that far surpassed any expectations. I was also able to validate numbers in terms of crew rates, and I look forward to bringing movies here."

**Kate Beyda:** "My expectations were more

than met, in fact they were surpassed!"

**Vance Van Petten:** "I was more than impressed with everything, including Nico Dekker (CEO of CTFS) and the work he has done. I'm no stranger to new studios, and what Nico has done with the tanks (for the production of *Black Sails*), the facilities and the craftsmanship truly exceeds what I have seen in the United States. You are at the forefront, and there is massive competition behind you. I went to South Korea last year, I've been to Jordan and the Czech Republic and they all want to be involved in this business but I've never seen the degree of investment and courage as I've seen in South Africa. We were treated like family."

**MaryAnn Hughes:** "You so wildly exceeded my expectations that I don't think we can put words to how amazed we are. From the warm welcoming attitude to the hospitality; all of us said we would like to move here! What we take away from this trip is that we have gained a wealth of information, fostered many relationships across individuals and companies and we have really planted the seed of 'how do we take this to the next level?'"

## How does South Africa compare to other countries in terms of technology?

**Kate Beyda:** "In terms of technology, South Africa is actually ahead of the curve in many respects. Those sound stages at Cape Town

Film Studios are incredibly advanced, and beyond anything I have seen before. We saw visual effects work being done, and the work was beautiful and highly competitive. The success of this trip for me was seeing the depth of what is available here. It was surprising and enlightening only because we were physically here to experience it and see it firsthand. South Africa has always had amazing commercial productions, and that translates so easily into film."

## Please tell us about some of the people you met while here.

**Vance Van Petten:** Francois Truter (Head of Incentives at the dti) literally spent days with us. He badgered us for detailed information regarding what we as foreign film executives look for in a possible film location. He was incredibly diligent. We also met some people from the Industrial Development Corporation, and were just astounded by their willingness to cooperate, and the passion that they so clearly have for nurturing the film sector in South Africa.

Zama Mkosi of the NEVF was also amazing. We are looking into partnering for a diversity project that would nurture upcoming, developing producers from South Africa and putting them through our 11-week programme in America. They could then come back and widen the networking circle.

Nils Flaatten of Wesgro also spent hours with us. What we need to know when we



Monica Rovik from Wesgro, MaryAnn Hughes from Walt Disney Studios, and Welcome Msomi from the KZN Film Commission

come to a country is that we can partner up with professional producers to make sure the work gets done in a way that we can sell it internationally. Production values are extremely important, and Nils put together an evening event which involved professional, excellent producers with vast experience. They were incredibly impressive.”

**Kate Beyda:** Mpumi Mabuza from Brand South Africa was great, and always had answers for us. We were introduced to all the right production people through Mpumi and team.

### So introducing film producers to South Africa was a smart move?

Vance Van Petten: “Producers are trailblazers, they are risk takers, and they are at the very front of the charge. They are the ones who are first in and last out. They work harder than anyone. It takes real leaders, and South African entrepreneurs are taking the forward step ahead of the industry. I represent 6 000 producers that have to make a living producing, so they are going all over the world to look for the best opportunities including financial, like tax incentives, as well as creative and construction talent and crew

members that are state of the art making the very best stuff.”

When the conversation turned to job creation, **Nils Flaatten** said “What we would really like to see is the destination’s capacity for film. We want to close the gaps between productions. When crews are done, we want them to move on to the next production regardless of what part of the value chain they are in. What arose from a conversation with MaryAnn was the potential of producing television and animation content in South Africa. Our people are more than capable in every aspect.

As we’ve travelled around the country, the comment has been made that we are really strong on the location side, we have a lot of diversity, and we knew that. But to hear it from people that have shot films and shows around the world really validated what we knew. The great period that South Africa finds itself in proves that the entire value chain is worthy of respect. There is so much depth here, and we have a great platform to work with going forward. This kind of connectivity, and understanding how the studio’s business model is driven and what the independent producer’s requirements are was invaluable

for us. We should look forward to seeing some big-budget films move into the country.”

**Nico Dekker**, CEO of Cape Town Film Studios, had this to say about the state of the South African film industry:

“I’ve personally always been a great fan of the spirit of filmmaking in the US, and the way they tackle challenges. It made me believe that anything is possible if you work hard and believe in your work. I’ve been very fortunate to be involved, and I like to think of the filmmaking process holistically. We don’t want just buildings. We also want people with passion. South Africa is proud of what it has accomplished in the film sector, and we still have a long road ahead of us. The biggest challenge for the South African film industry is to try and translate some of this energy into film partnerships with our friends overseas. That means we haven’t managed it yet. We have made small films and been very careful, but there is no reason why we can’t cross over into a different style of filmmaking. I feel that we don’t trust our industry to produce bigger budget films, and it’s just a matter of envisioning it. We make wonderful little films that go to festivals and win prizes. Gavin Hood said to me that we must somehow take the next step and cross into commercial-style film. The economic impact of film on the economy is around R5-billion, so the importance of making a success of this sector cannot be overstated”

The exuberance and enthusiasm that emanated from the four film executives was truly contagious. It was apparent that this ‘fam’ visit was no free holiday. Their humility, passion and drive shone through in their responses, and they were genuinely thrilled about the prospects of film and television productions being created in partnership with local industry.

This bodes extremely well for South Africa. 🗣️