



Nico Dekker

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Moulding Africa's Film Destiny

A friendly face with a charming disposition, Cape Town Film Studios' CEO Nico Dekker is a strong and determined man who hides his huge ambitions beneath a broad, welcoming smile. Anyone who has taken a trip out of the city on South Africa's National Road, the N2, will have seen two enormous pirate ships emerging from the swamps. But Cape Town Film Studios (CTFS) is so much more than just a film location where the latest Hollywood stars converge.

The three year old CTFS is now a "world class" studio with so much to offer, says Nico. "When I started, it was very clear to me that you have in principle three big choices and those are being extremely affordable, having a

very specific niche, or being high tech cutting edge. I chose cutting edge and said let's go for world-class. That's the only way to set ourselves apart." The general consensus for the studio's direction was for it to be as cheap as possible, but Nico analysed that and came to the conclusion that it simply would not be a unique enough selling point. "That was the tipping point. I was so thankful to have the support of my shareholders." Nico said that the Studio could never have happened without the incredible belief, support and long-term vision of Marcel Golding's Sabido Investments and Anant Singh's Videovision who are the main shareholders of the Studio. Nico emphasised that Sabido Investments and Videovision drove the Studio dream since 2003 and had to finance the Studio largely from their own pockets. The Studio also received financial support from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) and the City of Cape Town. The Provincial Government of the Western Cape holds a 10% share in the Studio through WESGRO.

The studio consists of 17000 m2 of in door production facilities, including five hectares of

back lots as well as four stages with two more in the pipeline. CTFS also have fully equipped production offices, art departments, workshops and two and two specially constructed sea and beach tanks –the first of their kind to ever have been built. It also includes various storage facilities, a chiller plant, data processing systems and much more. Productions that have passed through it since its official opening in December 2010 have spent in excess of R1.6 billion and have employed about 30,000 people throughout South Africa according to the DTI. This, of course, has had a ripple effect on the film industry and has helped to further cement its reputation.

"These are the only custom-built, high-end studios of its kind in Africa," says Nico. "And it created an incredible name in a short space of time among the decision makers across the world. Also, the way we've managed it has said to people that we can handle complex demands." It is the first studio of its kind in Southern Africa that has invested heavily in infrastructure for exterior sets. "It was quite a big step to realise that we needed this. We've got enough space here, but in order to use the



space effectively we've had to invest not only in interior but also in exterior infrastructure so that people can build the worlds that they need. The Labyrinth project of Scott Free (Ridley Scott) together with Tandem and South Africa's Film Afrika was an important turning point for the exterior back lot sets. We were required to build a hill for a 13th century village in France and we managed to create the infrastructure for the hill and the water elements within nine days – the engineers initially reckoned it would take 3-4 months." According to Nico, this set the tone for all their future back lot productions. "People were saying, 'Wow, this studio is willing to go the extra mile'. I actually said to the film industry and filmmakers that we are willing to meet your expectations. Show us your creative input and maybe we can help by creating some infrastructure for it."

CTFS housed an impressive number of large-scale productions. The latest was 'Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom', with iconic places like Vilakazi Street and Robben Island replicated to perfection. These back lot sets will become available to other productions in April 2014.

Throughout the latter part of the year, the studio housed 'Black Sails' Season 2, which is set to continue into 2014. The intricate construction work on these sets is impeccable and idyllic, transporting one far away from the marshes surrounding the studio. "We weren't sure if it was going to work but we went on under the guidance of Film Afrika who is the local facilitation production company for 'Black Sails'," he says. Starz Entertainment from Los Angeles is the broadcaster and producer of the series. Nina Heyns is the South African Producer and Line Producer and the series is designed by the internationally acclaimed Wolf Kroeger ('Prince Of Persia', 'Enemy At The Gate', 'Last of the Mohicans'). Nico also mentioned that the South African Head of

Construction, Clive Pollock of Bull's Eye was instrumental in the building of the ships, sets and exterior world. "The international film world is now discovering the incredible value for money that can be achieved through local heads of departments, crew and production facilitators," he said.

"The studio has, in three years, already become a symbol of professionalism and of what is possible in Africa," says Nico. He is no stranger to this kind of success, it seems, having started a number of companies which all became profitable within 24 months. But things weren't always this easy for him. After he left South Africa for Germany during the apartheid years, he initially worked as a lumber jack and fell into freelance journalism, documentary film-making and later scriptwriting, which was how he became involved in the film industry. He returned from exile to the country in 1991 and began working for the "alternative press" but shortly afterwards; he went on to co-found "The Editing Café", "Cine Gate Africa" and then "Table Mountain Motion Picture Studios. "Although I wasn't really interested in business, the companies were all quite successful. And I thought, I seem to have a fairly good talent to resolve complex challenges and discovered a gift for management and financial controls, which is something I never wanted to know anything about before." Nico says that this and his creative thinking is what helped him develop Cape Town Film Studios into the powerhouse that it is today.

"You can look at CTFS as a little piece of swamp land next to Khayelitsha that has very little around it and wonder why anybody in their right minds would come all the way from Europe or America to shoot here. This studio is bringing all the energy and creative powers of our country together with internationals. Already some of the greatest actors of our

time have worked here – Karl Urban, Stephen Fry, Ryan Reynolds, Hillary Swank, Denzel Washington, Charlize Theron, Tom Hardy and others. They've fought here, they've made love, they laughed, cried and died – all in a place that could have been seen as a wasteland. And that's why perspective is very important."

Nico believes that there are certain things holding the South African film industry back which need to change. "We've had investors who were burnt in the past who have lost all their money, but on projects that also were not commercially viable. So we have a problem now trying to get investment in the right things," he says. "It's almost as if we're caught between the niche films, culturally specific projects and ethnically orientated films." Print and advertising (P&A) overheads can be almost as expensive as the production budget and are often incorporated into distribution costs. Investing in our own P&A would be crucial for the future and Nico believes that if South Africa wants to break out of the mould it would have to aim at creating partnerships with the big six major studios – Sony, 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers, Walt Disney Pictures, Universal and Paramount – but make sure that we control and separate the P&A spending from the normal distribution budgets. He said the same applies to minor studios and independents."

He hopes to eventually replicate this model throughout the continent, where CTFS can refer international filmmakers to affiliates in other parts of the Country and Continent. "What we have is very precious – that the studio has created a reputation. It's a relatively small set up, compared to the 100-year-old studios elsewhere, only four stages, but it has got a big reputation for delivery and quality. And we could play a major role to combine the facilities and places across Africa."

For now, though, he will settle on expanding the studio facilities, which are at capacity and in need of an upgrade. "We want to build at least two more stages and these will be in the form of a single stage separated by a massive, 20-tonne sound wall. The idea is that you have one large studio and the sound wall to close it. Then you can manufacture on one side and work on set on other. We'd like to have this kind of flexibility."

And the studio's plans for the new year? Will Nico be taking on any of the productions he's had to turn down so far? "It all depends on how the future develops. We would love to, but it's certainly dependent on Black Sails. And we really love the Black Sails production." 🗨️