

## South Africa gets own Hollywood - Cape Town film studios also gives Bollywood a run for its money

14 January 2009

When actor Nicholas Cage made love to Bridget Moynahan for the 2005 hit *Lord of War*, a pungent smell hung over the old Cape Town fertiliser plant-turned-movie studio where the scene was filmed.

Even its chief executive Nico Dekker admitted the site opposite a sewerage works was a "stinky" and "hellish" place.

Yet the revamped factory helped turn South Africa into a top-notch movie-making spot, attracting filmmakers from around the world and showing the time was right to build a new multi-million rand complex.

Construction recently started to turn 200 hectares near pristine wetlands and lush Cape vineyards into Africa's first state-of-the-art studio worthy of Hollywood or Bollywood.

"It is like manna, honey to the bees. It positions us as believing in the future of film-making in Africa," Dekker said.

Cape Town Film Studios lies 25km east of the Mother City. It is the country's largest investment in its film industry, which employs more than 20,000 people.

Hope runs high it will boost the sector's annual earnings from the current R1 billion to as much as four times that amount.

The project, estimated at R430 million funded by shareholders and a R30 million investment by the Western Cape government, has been five years in the making.

The first stage should take shape within a year and construction completed by February 2010.

"The stars of the world are going to cry and love here, make wars here," Dekker said.

Such an investment during a global recession does not daunt Dekker, who has confidence in South Africa's varied locations, lower production costs and highly skilled crews.

Parts of the 2008 film *10 000 BC*, the 2006 hit *Blood Diamond* and movies starring big names such as Steven Seagal, Juliette Binoche and Andie MacDowell have been filmed here.

"People don't come to South Africa only for the locations," Dekker said.

"Now you can shoot through winter so you attract a different kind of production," he added.

The only other African country with a bustling film industry is Nigeria, but its films are low-budget, mobile, non-studio productions shot on video, which are often pirated as soon as they hit the streets.

Morocco has a big studio in Ourzazate. It hosted the 2006 film *Babel* with Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, but is not on the scale of Cape Town Film Studios.



And with one of the largest Indian communities outside India, South Africa is big on Bollywood.

Indian producers have flocked to film on location here in recent years and the new studio is expected to attract even more.

Bollywood producer Kumar Taurani spent three months in South Africa last year shooting *Prince of Thieves*, after 45 days in 2007 filming the blockbuster *Race* in what he describes as a "hassle-free shoot".

"We had permission to shoot almost everywhere. We blocked roads for days, all government departments gave us full cooperation," Taurani said.

Despite its 100-year history, South Africa's own film industry never quite caught the wave that propelled countries such as Australia, France and Germany to film-making success.

South African film-maker Derek Antonio Serra blames white minority rule as stifling the industry, which turned out mostly "politically correct, boring, dull" movies in post-apartheid years.

The government put money into films aimed at "nation building" and story-lines got stuck around apartheid or crime, he said.

Outside a handful of movies like the 2006 *Tsotsi* that earned an Oscar for best foreign language film, local productions have no appeal for an international audience, Serra said.

"We have a distribution problem so we can't make money from our films," he said.

Serra and others feel the new studio will stimulate creativity and improve quality, notably by encouraging more co-productions on international films.

Philip Key, managing director of Moonlighting, a local production company with divisions in Chile and Romania, said: "There are clearly projects that can't come to this country simply because we don't have stage space."

He said it would be a "very attractive" option for firms like his to have offices at the new studio. This would "enable us to be competitive ... our scope will widen".

For Dekker, the new studio that will include a 7000sqm sound stage is the first step to "unlock the full potential of our industry".

"We have great crew and great locations, but that is a very shallow path because if another country offers better conditions, then people just go there."

He has planned three major events this year to bring in industry players from North America, Europe and Asia to promote South Africa as a film destination, but stressed the local industry will not be ignored.

Several projects are in the pipeline, including a crew training academy at the studio and cheaper rates for local producers when major films are not in the making.

"The whole idea is that the studio becomes a hub that you can use as a foundation from where local film-making grows.

"We need a common vision and common ground for our own industry," Dekker said. – Sapa- AFP