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## Cape Town film studio brings in booming blockbuster business

By GEOFFREY YORK

On the outskirts of Cape Town, *Mad Max: Fury Road* and the much-anticipated *Dark Tower* movies are made on the cheap

Just beyond the outskirts of one of South Africa's poorest slums, an 18th-century pirate ship rises ominously on the horizon. The huge wooden vessel is a surreal sight, stranded in a landlocked basin, surrounded by fields and mountains.

Nearby, on the same film-production lot, are replicas of a sandy Caribbean beach, a blood-soaked Nairobi hospital, a historic American town, Nelson Mandela's prison cell and the futuristic set of a tent-pole movie based on a Stephen King novel.

This is the first custom-built, state-of-the-art film studio in sub-Saharan Africa, and it's rapidly becoming one of Hollywood's favourite places to shoot. It touts itself as "the most successful film studio in the developing world" – a grand claim that might even be true.

After opening its doors in late 2010, Cape Town Film Studios has been so aggressively courted by so many movie producers that it was obliged to turn away 32 film projects in 2014 alone. (Sources say it turned away the latest *Star Wars* and *Spider-Man* films, although the studio refuses to comment.) Paradoxically, South Africa's own film producers have seldom managed to crack the global market. There hasn't been a true global smash hit from a South African production company since the apartheid-era comedy, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, in 1980.

But the Cape Town studio has provided a different route for South Africa to enter the global film business. It estimates it has created 50,000 part-time jobs and attracted some \$140-million (U.S.) in film investment over the past five years, reaching profitability faster than anyone expected in South Africa's troubled economic climate.

Now the studio is expanding again, having built another workshop and sound stage this year, and it remains solidly booked. The new sound stage was immediately grabbed for the film version of Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series, starring Matthew McConaughey and Idris Elba. Shooting on the first movie began in May.

"We're fully taken up, and we're already booked through next year, and possibly until 2020," says Nico Dekker, the ebullient South African who serves as the studio's chief executive officer. "It's remarkable. We're turning work away again, and I never thought that would be possible – to have every millimetre booked. I even had to ask two veteran producers to vacate their offices here because we needed the space. We could fill two or three Cape Town studios with what we're doing."

Twenty-two years after the death of apartheid, South Africa has become a popular film location, prized for its natural beauty, sunshine and diverse landscapes that can double for most parts of the world. But the challenge now is to convert its film sector from location-based shooting to a manufacturing-based studio industry, which could create three times as many jobs.

So far it seems to be succeeding. Built at a cost of just \$30-million, the Cape Town studio is competing against \$500-million studios in Europe and North America, yet it has attracted a host of big-budget Hollywood films, including the paranormal drama *Chronicle* (in which Cape Town doubled for Seattle), the Ryan Reynolds/Denzel Washington spy thriller *Safe House*, the comic-book adaptation *Dredd*, the hugely popular *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and the pirate-focused television series *Black Sails*, which is now shooting its fourth season in huge tanks on the Cape Town lot.

The studio has garnered high praise from producers and performers. British actor Stephen Fry, after completing his role in a television adaptation of *The Borrowers* here, tweeted that the Cape Town studio made Britain's famed Pinewood Studios "look v shabby." Andrew Macdonald, a producer of *Dredd*, told Time magazine that the Cape Town studio is one of very few in the world that can create a film looking like a \$100-million production for less than half of that cost.

The 200-hectare studio, located about 30 kilometres from the centre of Cape Town, is majority-owned by two South African companies with close connections to the local television and film industries, including a company headed by Anant Singh, producer of the film version of Nelson Mandela's memoirs, *Long Walk to Freedom* – one of the early films shot here. The Western Cape provincial government owns a further 10 per cent.

Development of the studio had been foundering for several years before the 2008 arrival of Dekker, who had long experience in converting warehouses into film-production sites. "Nobody believed in it," he recalls. "The negative feeling was so overwhelming. The local film industry said it can't work, it's crazy, it's insane, it will go down in two years. But I believed in it. And everybody's starting to take it seriously now."

South African government support, including a program of 20 per cent rebates, has been crucial in attracting film projects from Hollywood and elsewhere. South Africa's weak currency, which has devalued drastically in the past two years, is another advantage.

But equally important is the studio's emphasis on thrift and innovation, duplicating the look of high-tech blockbusters at a vastly lower cost. *Chronicle*, for example, earned close to \$130-million worldwide, but cost only about \$10-million to make, despite the need for complex flying scenes, Dekker says. "[The studio] Fox was blown away."

The sets on his back lot are recycled to serve double or triple purposes. The Robben Island prison, created for the Mandela movie, was turned into a hospital set for *Eye in the Sky*, a British drone-themed thriller. A replica of an African shanty town, built as a South African township for the Mandela film, was transformed into Mogadishu for a National Geographic production about the U.S.-Somali battle known as Black Hawk Down.

"I'm always saying that you need a 'branch' solution," Dekker says. "When you're shooting and you want to make something go away, you can either build a huge green-screen or blue-screen wall, which takes time and money, or you can take the branch of a tree and hold it in front of the camera. It provides more definition in the shot and it costs nothing. So I always ask, 'Where's the branch?' Even the architects tell me, 'Nico, we found a branch.' There's always something that costs less and is more clever and solves things immediately. People trust that I'll look for that."

His latest sound stage, currently being used for the *Dark Tower* series, has a 15-metre-high ceiling and massive 2.5-tonne doors to seal out the noise from artists who can be working on the other side. "It's the first in Africa: a double-stage with a moveable sound wall. You film on one side, but your artists are preparing the set on the other side, so that you can swap quickly and you don't lose a day." He was able to get the new stage built in just six months, instead of the projected 15 months. "It's been profitable from day one."

He hopes to get shareholder approval to keep expanding, with a new stage every year. Meanwhile, studio developers in Europe and Canada have been approaching him for advice. "It's ironic, because they've been in this business much longer than me," he says. "They're interested in my technology for building studios at a fraction of the price, but still able to host any major production."

In its early years, the Cape Town studio had to import 30 per cent of its art directors and assistant directors from North America and Europe. But now almost all of its crews are locally hired. People from impoverished local townships, who had never even ventured inside a cinema to watch a film before, have now been trained as painters, carpenters, artisans, costume-makers, metalworkers and landscapers.

It creates jobs and skills that would never exist if South Africa's film sector was still trapped in location-based filmmaking.

"The studio has become a hub for manufacturing," Dekker says. "It's a longer and more intense filmmaking. We build these worlds."

For the *Black Sails* television production, local workers built the wooden sailing ships and almost everything else – even palm trees, from moulds. "These are very highly sophisticated manufacturing jobs," Dekker says.

"They'd never built ships before, but these ships are so good that the guys from Paramount and Warner say they haven't seen anything like it. It shows what our people can do when we unlock their passions."

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