

SAN FRANCISCO, 1890: the cobblestones in the narrow alley are scattered with horse dung and a washing line is strung between roofs. Cluttered, chaotic and utterly believable, the year is actually 2019 and this is 'Chinatown' at the Cape Town Film Studios. More than 600 crew and 390 businesses are working on *Warrior*, a Bruce Lee-inspired TV series being filmed locally. It's just one of the constructed sets under wraps here.

Eleven years ago, the creative gods turned their eyes to tip of Africa and said, 'You can be anything you want to be.' The Mother City, already a popular location for international modelling shoots and film features, responded by building the first Hollywood-style film studio complex in Africa. The Cape Town Film Studios (CTFS) was launched in 2008 by local producing legend Anant Singh, who is now its chair. It's the biggest investment in long-term film infrastructure in the history of South Africa and is often the first choice of international filmmakers, says current CEO Nico Dekker. Dekker was responsible for the design, business model and management of the studios from the onset.

'Built at a cost of just \$30 million, the Cape Town studio is competing against \$500 million studios in Europe and North America but has attracted a host of big-budget Hollywood films,' says Dekker.

Capetonians became quite used to seeing a true-to-life 18th-century pirate ship off the N2 highway. A closer look and you'd see that the 'ocean' action was a 70x50m deep-sea tank, 25km of rope made up the intricate rigging, 8 000 trucks of sand were sourced from a local quarry, and the 'cannons' and shattered windows of the merchant ship were meticulously recreated by specialised artisans. Dekker says the ship became an instant 'traffic calmer' on the N2. People instinctively slowed down to rubberneck at the surreal sight. *Black Sails* went on to hit TV screens in January 2014.

The landmark was due largely to the skill and artistry provided by Western Cape talent and yet 10 years ago, when the concept was still an ambitious storyboard, it didn't get off the ground until Dekker was brought in. The industry was sceptical but like the plot of a good movie, interlocking characters, storylines, producers and investors came together in the

## The Mother of All Movie Locations

FROM ARTISTS, CRAFTSMEN, CATERERS AND CAMERA OPERATORS TO EXTRAS AND ECO-

WARRIORS, THE WESTERN CAPE HAS THE LOT - AND HOLLYWOOD LOVES THE ACTION.

BY KATHY MALHERBE

equivalent of a star cast. 'The biggest challenge now is the shortage of space,' say Dekker. 'We have to turn productions away, which is why we are considering future expansion.'

Part of the reason for the exponential growth of the film industry worldwide is the advent of streaming services like Netflix, says Dekker. 'This allows people to watch a wide variety of award-winning TV shows, movies, documentaries and more on internet-connected devices. Viewers have a digital library from which they can pick almost anything for their entertainment. It's a revolution based around the personalised experience. No ordering, no adverts – just select, click and watch.' Netflix receives approximately U\$10 a month from 140 million people. In South Africa, that translates to about R150 – the average price of a movie ticket at a cinema. Netflix content spending is expected to hit U\$15 billion a year in 2019, and the South African film industry is getting a share of that.

It's not just our studios that attract producers. The Western Cape is a 'slam dunk' destination for filming. Within two to three hours from the city, location scouts can lock down a Karoo desert, dramatic seas, deserted beaches, luxury cliff-hanging penthouses, dirt airport runways and the bushveld. Apart from highly professional quality content and creative workmanship, scouts are shot-list happy from dawn to dusk – and in summer, that's a productive 16 hours of filming.

- 1 Swartland Renosterveld conservation area
- 2 Stage 2
- 3 Stage 4
- 4 Stage 1
- 5 Stage 3
- 6 Workshop A
- 7 Workshop B
- 8 Hazardous waste facility
- 9 Satellite platform
- 10 Back-up energy centre
- 11 Environmental centre
- 12 18th-century American town set
- 13 Beach tank and tropical forest set
- 14 Deep-sea tank
- 15 Dune slack wetland conservation area
- 16 African town set
- 17 Historical European, Caribbean sets
- 18 Rainwater catchment ponds
- 19 American 1950s motel set
- 20 Prison set
- 21 Major static ship

BUILT AT A COST OF JUST \$30 MILLION, THE CAPE

Where there's a large-scale production, there are the inevitable cast members. It's passé now for locals to spot Hollywood stars in Cape Town, as they're either out and about in award-winning restaurants, in our world-class hotels or enjoying the sightseeing opportunities. Even beyond the city limits, tourism has boomed and smaller towns like Gansbaai get their chance to shine too, having thrilled – or scared the living daylights out of – the who's-who of Hollywood with shark cage diving and whale watching in season.

There are approximately 5 000 locations and countless privately-owned sites available but the central business dis-

TOWN STUDIO IS COMPETING AGAINST \$500 MILLION STUDIOS IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA

trict continues to be the most popular location for shoots, with 37 percent of permits issued for this area. Camps Bay/Bakoven and Clifton follow, both representing seven percent. As much as a weak rand ruins travel for locals, the exchange rate helps sweeten the deal when filming here. It's up to 40 percent cheaper to shoot here compared to Europe and the US, and 20 percent cheaper than Australia.

It's one of the reasons that the Castle of Good Hope was used in Prince Philip's 1957 tour around the world in *The Crown*, a Netflix-original drama that chronicles the life of Queen Elizabeth II from the 1940s to modern times. Around the corner, the Good Hope Centre was transformed into the interior of an Egyptian tomb for the 2016 adventure-drama miniseries *Tutankhamun*, starring Max Iron and Sam Neill, and based on the discovery of Tutankhamun's last resting place by Howard Carter.

Hout Bay harbour featured too, this time in the 2018 *Tomb Raider* movie reboot, transformed into Hong Kong with floating walkways and restaurants. In the fourth season of Showtime's *Homeland*, Woodstock and Observatory were portrayed as the home village of a Taliban leader, while the Franschhoek mountains served as the backdrop of the Afghan hinterland.

Other notable productions to take place on South African soil include *Eye in the Sky* (2015), Ridley Scott's new sci-fi series *Raised by Wolves*, *Long Walk to Freedom* (2013) and Netflix's *The Kissing Booth* (2018). The epic R260 million fantasy series *Troy: Fall of a City* was shot exclusively on African soil and is the BBC's most expensive drama, costing R32,7 million per episode. Almost 2 000 extras were employed from Cape Town.

It's not only the 'crowd scene' cast who are feeling the halo effect of the industry. Eiden Swan is a designer, artist and visualiser. Right now, she specialises in 'breakdown', a method of ageing anything from curtains 'circa 1800' to



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clothing that needs to look sweat-stained and travel-worn for a period film. 'I stain and burn things a lot,' she grins. A sharp-eyed talent spotter for a series got to hear of her work and commissioned her. It's fabulously 'real' and will suspend anyone's belief that they're not viewing history come to life. 'Projects like these are gold for me and an artistic challenge,' she says.

It all adds up and the province's economy is benefiting. From 2008 to 2016, 88 000 people were employed by productions hosted at Cape Town Film Studios – directly or indirectly. While they might be contributing to the burgeoning world of fantasy, the R6 billion contributed to the GDP annually is hard fact. This is thanks to the film industry spawning satellite industries. From pre- to post-production, there are producers, crew, actors, extras, caterers, auditors, lawyers, medical teams, costume designers, make-up artists, musicians, carpenters, hairdressers, seamstresses, electricians, set builders and transporters. Uber drivers, car rental companies, taxis, shuttle crews and the hospitality industry feel the positive impact too.

There's no need for production companies to expensively airfreight gear either. Tony Eddy, CEO of Panavision, says

Whether your movie requires a village scene in Morocco or the Med or whether it needs to snow in the Midwest America, studio sets constructed at Cape Town Film Studios spirit not only the director and cast there, but members of a movie or TVseries audience too.





From otherworldly sci-fi scenes to down-to-the-detail historical accuracy, the Western Cape boasts the talent, locations, expertise and industry savvy to take any production from storyboard to screen.

the industry has grown so much that most of the equipment is hired in Cape Town. To get an idea of the scale of the operation and logistics, Panavision easily services up to 60 international commercials in a single month as well as five or six long-form projects. In terms of crews involved, it depends on the project size, with some of the long-form work employing a thousand or more at a time, while a big commercial may have as many as 80 people on set per shoot.

Eddy says that equipment and key film crew availability are linked – and the studios are spoilt for choice when it comes to good local crews. This, in turn, attracts the hire of equipment. ‘In order to compete, we have to keep up with internationally competitive technologies. Anamorphic lenses are becoming very popular and used for both feature films and commercials to create a very specific cinematic look. Panavision is by far the biggest supplier of anamorphic glass to the world industry, so it makes sense that we have these available in Cape Town.’

When you consider how many people are on different sets across the Cape, the question of feeding these creatives could be a logistical nightmare. If you find catering for a dinner party stressful, spare a thought for the companies who cater specifically for film sets. ‘It’s quite demanding,’ says one catering company manager who wishes to remain anonymous. ‘Often the notification comes the night before, which is why staff begin preparing the food from midnight.’

Lynne Matthysen, one of the top film industry caterers, says the maximum she has catered for is 2 000 people – twice a day. It would be challenging enough if they all followed a similar diet. Not so easy. Think kosher, halaal, vegetarian, vegan, pescetarian, gluten-free and nut allergies, amongst others. One catering business led to the development of several satellite businesses, including growing or-

ganic vegetables and upskilling employees. Matthysen calls it the ‘university of growing food’. ‘My employees take this skill back to the townships and the ripples of job creation continue. It’s like dominoes filmed backwards – each small industry creates employment and uplifts more people.’

Catering is an obvious job creation area but there are other exciting opportunities for young South Africans. ‘When you consider that 29 percent of South Africans are unemployed,’ says Seton Bailey, who heads up the South African Film Academy (SAFA), ‘what South Africa needs more than anything else is employment opportunities. SAFA is a vital bridge between education and employment for South Africans – we accept interns between the ages 18 and 35, and focus on developing emerging black crew, management, heads of departments and independent filmmakers.’

The attraction also lies in a Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) rebate of 20 percent for film producers creating employment opportunities and supporting local satellite industries. Bailey says, ‘The trainees are inducted with SAFA, then the production manager contacts us and we place interns and trainees where they are best suited. We are delighted that so many of our interns and trainees are on fixed-term contracts. And they work hard for it: the hours are long and the pace rigorous but each production is an opportunity to prove yourself for the next. A SAFA trainee receives a minimum stipend of about R2 500 per week, which is not bad for a starter. This “learning by doing” is the focus of SAFA – offering life, occupational and entrepreneurial skills development, in-service training, skills transfer and film industry transformation.’

With the high rate of recidivism in South Africa (70 percent), SAFA has introduced an ambitious new project called Film4Offenders. Sponsored in part by private investors, pre-

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selected offenders waiting for release or on parole are trained and mentored in film, electronic and digital media production. Skills and work opportunities when inmates are released are the biggest contributors to prevent re-offending.

The feel-good factor in the film industry is not limited to employment opportunities, boosting the economy and giving offenders a second chance. For some time now, key role players in the South African film industry have acknowledged the critical need for a unified front to mitigate the environmental impact of the industry. *Raised by Wolves*



is a modern-day reimagining of the childhood of writer Caitlin Moran. Serviced by Film Afrika Worldwide, the series is developing a model for environmentally sustainable film production. During the 2018/19 filming of the series, Bluewater trailers dispensed purified and chilled still or sparkling water that reduced waste by a half a million bottles as well as saving on the cost of drinking water. They use a patented reverse osmosis purification process that can generate up to 7 000 litres of pure water every day from normally tough-to-purify brackish or borehole water, so as not to put strain on municipal resources.

As a result, Cape Town Film Studios prides itself as one of the leading green studios in the developing world. An integrated approach to waste management ensures that waste generated is recycled or re-used wherever possible. A natural filtration rainwater catchment system sustainably stores approximately 3 to 5 million litres of water on site for a variety of non-potable uses. The studios are home to more than 70 hectares of wetland conservation areas, which serve as a sanctuary to various bird species.

Spotting our home turf may be difficult when the wonder of artists and artisans disguise the real locations so adeptly but we’re feeling ‘below the line’ support. If the world of make-believe can become reality thanks to a multi-disciplinary and highly skilled community of creative, operational and logistic experts who buy into profit, people and the planet, who knows what will come next? ▽

The 18th-century pirate ship at CTFS, built locally and used during the filming of the four-season Starz series *Black Sails*, serviced by Film Afrika.