

News

Cape film studio will be Africa's largest

Local industry certain to reap fruits of state-of-the art venue, which is expected to attract more international projects

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

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

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

Construction recently started to turn 200ha 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 filmmaking in Africa," Dekker said.

Cape Town Film Studios, initially named Dreamworld, lies 25km east of its namesake city. It is the country's largest-ever 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 rand funded by shareholders and with a R30-million rand investment by the Western Cape government, has been five years in the making. The first stage should take shape within a year and construction be 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 SA's varied locations, lower production costs and what he touts as highly skilled crews.

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

"People don't come to SA only for the locations," he said.

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

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, which has hosted productions such as 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, SA 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 SA last year shooting the action thriller *Prince of Thieves*, after 45 days in 2007 filming the blockbuster *Race* in what he describes as a "hassle-free shoot".

"We got permission to shoot almost everywhere. We blocked roads for days, all government organisations gave us full co-operation," Taurani said.



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

South African filmmaker Derek Antonio Serra blames years of white-minority rule that he said stifled 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 storylines 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, South African 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 and others feel the new studio will stimulate creativity and improve quality, notably by encouraging more co-productions on international films.

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

It would be a "very attractive" option, he added, 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, which will include a vast 7 000sq m of sound stage, is the first step to "unlock the full potential of our industry".

"We have got great crews 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 in 2009 to bring in industry players from North America, Europe and Asia to promote SA 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 South African producers when major films are not in the making.

"The whole idea is that the studio becomes a hub you can use as a foundation from where it (local filmmaking) grows," he said.

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