

Studio business makes Dekker tick



Andrew Nicol, director of *Lord of War* and Nico Dekker in front of TMMPS

Now that the property lease agreement on TMMPS has come to an end, how will it impact on your future plans?

It is a great pity that TMMPS cannot continue at the current site, because the company was actually hugely successful.

As you know, we did extensive renovations in order to create a studio complex. With the assistance of my team I have been able to create considerable profit and pay a dividend to my shareholders which made everybody happy. This is possibly the first time ever that a studio company has been able to pay a dividend after such a short time. I also believe that we have learned valuable lessons on how to run this kind of business in a profitable way. It must also be noted that we have never received any form of assistance from government or an outside organisation. Everything we achieved was done by taking high personal risk and without access to extensive capital.

So I was obviously sad when we were unable to continue at the current site. At the same time I have accepted the reality. But the moment I closed that door, a series of new doors opened. Various groups approached me with requests to either manage or to build new studios. The first project I have accepted was to redesign and build sound stages at Q-Studios. This is already a success story and will provide Johannesburg with new state of the art sound stages for television and small features.

So TMMPS is actually alive, well and kicking with various projects in the pipeline. I have taken over the company from the former shareholders and Rashay Magan, the current Studio and Business Manager, will be a future partner in the business.

How did you become involved in the design and development of studios?

I have been involved in the research and planning of studios for seven years. At first a group of European investors wanted to build studios in Cape Town around the year 2000. The taxi wars and bomb attacks that happened during that period stopped that project half way through. I also headed a consortium that bid for the building of studios in Cape Town in 2003 and eventually I started TMMPS in 2004. I always believed that SA needs affordable studio space to accommodate international and national productions. The situation with TMMPS forced me and my team to find affordable solutions for items that are normally extremely expensive. We experimented, designed and developed our own sound proofing systems, sound doors, ventilation, lighting etc. These designs were so successful that they were accepted and used successfully by some of the biggest productions the country has ever seen. Jean Vincent Putzos, the set designer for *Lord of War* and *10 000 BC*, was over the moon with the sound quality and in an interview with *Screen Africa* (November 2004) actually expressed the belief that TMMPS could form the basis for an SA "Pinewood" studio.

What is your background?

I have a background in marketing, management and journalism and returned from political exile to SA in 1991. My involvement in film started as a scriptwriter and a documentary filmmaker. I was a founder of equipment rental companies like the Editing Café and Cinagate Africa and started TMMPS with the producers Marlow de Mardt and Brigid Olën, as well

The enterprising spirit of Nico Dekker contributed to the success of South Africa's first feature film studio complex, Table Mountain Motion Picture Studios (TMMPS) in Cape Town. With no financial assistance from government or any industry organisation, Dekker and his partners managed to develop a viable studio model that showed an admirable profit within 24 months.

In May came the shock announcement that the studio complex would have to close as the property on which it was housed had been sold. It was a blow to everyone involved. But you can't keep a good man down. Instead Dekker has been able to capitalise on his unique expertise in the construction and management of studios in SA. SCREEN AFRICA speaks to him about his plans and the SA studio environment in general.

as Rudi Junge and a group of engineers in June 2004.

What are some of the future projects that you will be involved in?

As mentioned already I am involved in the redesigning of Q-Studios. I am also involved with studio projects in Cape Town, but would like to say more about that at a later stage. I have also founded Table Mountain Construction and partnered in this regard with someone with many years of construction experience. Table Mountain Construction will focus on specialised building work, like sound stages, high quality flooring and top of the range finishes

You mentioned that you work with a good team. Who are they?

Among my staff are people like Rashay Magan with skills in financial structuring. I also have a top construction manager on board, Hennie Engelbrecht. My administration team is outstanding and headed by Diana-Jane Weaver. We are backed up by some expert craftsmen like Eddie Arendse, Danny Jacobs and Sydney Oyiya who all have highly specialised technical skills. They have been trained in new technologies that are needed for the creation of affordable studios.

What is your assessment of the opportunities presented by the building of more studios in SA?

I believe there is still a huge opportunity for SA to attract studio based productions. The main challenge though will be our ability to

create affordable studio space. Speaking to representatives of big studios like Sony and Warner Brothers amongst others, confirmed my belief that foreigners won't bring big productions to SA which require studio builds unless we provide these spaces at highly competitive prices. The main reason to shoot in the country is production value for money. We should therefore not expect to charge the same rates achievable in Los Angeles, Spain, Mexico or Australia. I actually believe there is enough studio space elsewhere in the world for top A-Grade films and that we should focus on productions which need affordable studios. The alternative would be for the government to subsidise studio builds but that would raise the question of who is going to get subsidised and who not.

At Q-Studios, I have again managed to build sound stages at highly reduced rates using all the skills and experience I have gained in the last few years. I believe that Q-Studios will be a financial success even though it has not received any form of subsidy or financial support. It is financed by an individual woman, Ilse Hahn.

You are apparently exploring a role in distribution. Please elaborate.

I believe our film industry will only be able to grow if we create a successful link to distribution and financing of our work. We also need the facilities. I have started with the distribution arm of Table Mountain Studios, called Table Mountain Pictures. It will distribute international work created by South Africans for local television, as well as local theatrical distribution. Table Mountain Pictures is a sales agency for South African television and feature film. 🌐