

# Cape Town Film Studios

South Africa's portal to Hollywood...  
Stephen Bennett





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South Africa has a highly-developed film infrastructure. Since the inception of commercial television in the 1970s and the emergence of the international export industry, this infrastructure – supported by South Africa’s sophisticated advertising, communications, IT, hospitality and transport sectors – has achieved global recognition.

Originally, the industry was mostly situated in and around Johannesburg – South Africa’s economic hub and most-populated city. However, since the advent of democracy 20 years ago, the rapid growth of international film production services in South Africa has seen the emergence of Cape Town as the industry’s growth centre, with Cape Town Film Studios (CTFS) as its catalyst.

Situated in Faure, on the Cape Flats, about 35 kilometres from Cape Town and easily accessible from the N2 highway, it is the only custom-built, high-end studio of its kind in Africa, and the first investment in permanent film infrastructure in South Africa’s history. CTFS’ Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Nico Dekker, says that the Studio could never have happened without the belief, support and long-term vision of Marcel Golding’s Sabido Investments and Anant Singh’s Videovision. They are the main shareholders who drove the studio dream, starting in 2003, with finance largely from their own pockets. In 2009, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) contributed R16-million to the construction of the mega studio; and further contributions came from the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) and the City of Cape Town. The Provincial Government of the Western Cape holds a 10 percent share in the Studios through Wesgro.

Described by The Hollywood Reporter in May 2011, as a state of the art production facility giving Hollywood a run for its money; CTFS offers 17 000m<sup>2</sup> of production facilities, with 7 500m<sup>2</sup> of high-specification sound stages, spread over four buildings with fully-equipped production offices, make-up and star rooms; a 300m<sup>2</sup> Deep Sea Tank and an 8 000m<sup>2</sup> Beach Tank. A main data centre links the studio with a high-speed fibre to all the major international cities. Two fully-functional workshops, with art departments and mini-workshops, enable the manufacturing of any set, costume or prop. There is a hazardous waste facility; an energy centre with a one megawatt capacity generator powered backup system; and a chiller plant on the premises, for ease of operations. Construction has already begun on a double stage separated by a 20 ton sound wall; and a new workshop, due for completion at the beginning of 2016.

To date, 24 productions have been hosted at CTFS, including the comic book adaptation Dredd (DNA Films/Kalahari Pictures); the paranormal thriller Chronicle (20th Century Fox/Film Afrika), Labyrinth (Scott Free/Tandem/Film Afrika), Safe House (Universal Pictures/Moonlighting), The Borrowers (Working Title/Moonlighting), Long Walk to Freedom (Videovision), Mad Max: Fury Road (Kennedy Miller Productions/Moonlighting Films) and Eye in the Sky (Raindog Film/e-One Productions/Moonlighting Films). The pirate-themed high-end miniseries, Black Sails (Starz Entertainment/Film Africa) is the latest production to taking advantage of the facilities and expertise offered by the Studios, and is now in its third season.

"Figures that we got back from the DTI, show that productions which used the studio in the four years of its lifetime employed 47 000 people (mostly from previously disadvantaged communities), and invested R2-billion, with an economic impact of R6-billion. The Studio's biggest role was to change the image of the country from a location-based film-making destination, to a manufacturing-based facilitation. While Cape Town, with its stunning scenery and excellent crews, has established itself as a successful location for movie commercials, it relies only on small teams of trained workers. Studio-based filmmaking creates three times more jobs than a location-based film. The productions using the Studios offer unique opportunities to carpenters, builders, artisans, and professionals such as architects, as a result of the manufacturing style of filmmaking," says Dekker.

The continued success of the industry has been made possible by the collaboration between the private sector and different government institutions. The Department of Economic Development and Tourism has the statutory and legislative provincial mandate for tourism, trade and investment promotion; it provides strategic direction, facilitation and implementation of initiatives to ensure that there is economic growth and job creation in the film sector. In December 2012, the Minister of Finance, Development and Economic Tourism for the Western Cape Government, Alan Winde, announced that promoting Cape Town and the Western Cape as a film destination would

fall under Wesgro. Addressing stakeholders in the Western Cape's film industry, Winde said: "Our tax envelope is shrinking and our government has to do more, with less. Wesgro already has the responsibility of marketing the Western Cape as a tourism, investment and trade destination. Adding the marketing of the Western Cape's entire film industry to the portfolio will mean that we have a streamlined and coordinated marketing strategy with which to approach local and international markets." Another advantage for Wesgro is that as the official agency of the provincial government, it has automatic entrée to its counterparts in the countries it markets to.



*Nico Dekker - Chief Executive Officer of Cape Town Film Studios*

Wesgro has developed a comprehensive, five year strategy to achieve the target of a globally-competitive film and media industry in Western Cape by 2020. Key activities include inbound and outbound missions and marketing initiatives, together with SATour, Brand South Africa, the DTI, the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) and other provinces, to locations such as China, Hollywood and India, as well as representation at major film festivals such as Beijing, Cannes and Annecy.

One such initiative between Brand South Africa, Wesgro, and other national and provincial partners, brought four top





*Aerial view of production set of Black Sails*

Hollywood film executives to South Africa for what is known as a familiarisation trip. The group comprised Vance Van Petten, Executive Director of the Producers Guild of America; MaryAnn Hughes, Vice President of Film and Production Planning at Disney; Sara Spring, Senior Vice President of Feature Production at Paramount; and Kate Beyda, Senior Vice President of Physical Production at Warner Bros. The purpose of the visit was to showcase the country's talent, locations, skills and attractive financial incentives to industry heavyweights, with the intention of attracting more film productions from the major movie studios and independent producers.

The guests were more than impressed with what they heard and saw – and in particular with their visit to The Cape Town Film Studios. "In terms of technology, South Africa is actually ahead of the curve in many respects. We saw visual-effects work being done and the work was beautiful and highly competitive," said Beyda.

"The Cape Town Studios are state-of-the-art; and the level of craftsmanship on top of that far surpassed any expectations. I look forward to bringing movies here," said Spring.

"I'm no stranger to new studios; what Dekker has done with the tanks (for the production of *Black Sails*), facilities and craftsmanship, truly exceeds what I have seen in the United States. They are at the forefront, and there is massive competition behind them," said Van Petten.

"As a result of continued investment in CTFS, Western Cape's film industry has experienced gradual growth, which has helped to keep key crew in South Africa. As predicted, this strategic studio investment is starting to pay dividends," says Nils Flaatten, CEO of Wesgro.

"The Department of Trade and Industry's good national incentives; the region's bountiful locations and many ancillary offerings;

such as creative and post-production facilities, are a bonus that sweetens the offering. Winter, which is normally quiet for our industry, has seen Cape Town and Western Cape experience a remarkably busy time. With independent features such as the SA/American Momentum; international TV series such as *Homeland*, Season 4; in addition to reports that steady commercial and stills-work are producing jobs earlier in the cycle, it spells the beginning of a good summer season – perhaps one of the best."

"I would like to commend the efforts of the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF), Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), DTI and the sector development agencies who have been working together with regions and the industry to market South Africa in order to attract more foreign work. On the local front; industry is encouraged to develop their own projects – which can only be beneficial," concludes Flaatten.

Dekker is upbeat about the future. "We were not previously known as a country for high-tech manufacturing for film. The studio helped to change that, explaining the many shoots coming in now. We have something that is difficult to describe in film: on-screen value-for-money, especially in comparison to other parts of the world. It is not always easily quantifiable; you may be able to shoot for less money in other places, but the value on the screen is not as high.

"It is a combination of crew quality – South Africans are inventive; they are able to work to deadlines; they are pro-active (our directors and our art departments have grown tremendously) – and the manufacturing side. People are drawn to Cape Town because we are no longer merely location-based: South Africans are willing and able to commit to complex sites, creating a higher on-screen value."