

# Media



# THE MOVIE THAT TOOK "34 YEARS TO PRODUCE"

by Rochelle Somerset

# INTRODUCTION

A Fire in Africa is a feature film drama with a running time of 90 minutes. It was produced in 1987 and 1988 and distributed in 1989 and is now headed for re-release, following intensive restoration, re-visioning and re-mastering, which commenced in 2017 and concluded in 2021. The motivation for embarking upon this project was the standing ovation the movie received at its premiere held at the NuMetro Cinema in Midrand in 1989. This media release is aimed at "telling the full story" of the trials and tribulations of this low-budget independent film under the headings Background, Synopsis, Behind the Scenes, Revenue, Cast and Crew, Thirty-Year Struggle, Restoration, Recognition, Tragedy Strikes, Expectations, X Factor, and Conclusion.

# BACKGROUND

The first Rugby World Cup was held in 1987. A glaring omission from the tournament was the Springbok team, excluded because of an international sports boycott supporting the repudiation of South Africa's policy of apartheid. Gerhard Uys (producer) and Emil Kolbe (scriptwriter) earnestly debated the unethical, if not immoral, practice of calling a tournament a "world cup" when one of the strongest teams in the world was not allowed to compete. The question arose: would it be ethical to call the Olympic gold medallist in the 100 metres "the fastest man in the world" if it was quite possible that another man, perhaps with superhuman abilities, could be living in a place where the very existence of the Olympic Games was unknown? It was this discussion that led to the writing of a screenplay and ultimately the production of A Fire in Africa, with its logline: "An aspiration born in a lost civilisation."

The production of the film was part of a Master's research project aimed at providing a comprehensive guide to The Production of Low-budget Feature Films in South Africa (from Concept to Distribution), as part of the South African B-Film Subsidy Scheme, with its focus on producing films for black African audiences. This research was an ideal opportunity for young filmmakers to gain experience and start their careers in feature film production. Two years later, the film was completed and exhibition copies made for distribution. However, in 1990, when the study, with a thesis exceeding 400 pages - the most comprehensive in the history of the Pretoria Technikon Film School -was in its final stages, the B-Scheme was terminated, which rendered the research virtually obsolete. But, even though the research had been abandoned, the film was completed and screened in townships across Gauteng until it eventually qualified for full state





Emil Kolbe (Scriptwriter)





INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

### SYNOPSIS

The OvaHimba tribe of the Namib Desert, descendants of the Ancient Egyptians from the era of Queen Nefertiti and once the richest nomadic tribe in Africa, find themselves on the brink of extinction. Trapped in the 1904 Herero-Nama war, they settle in the godforsaken Namib desert after fleeing genocide at the hands of the German army. Weary of the name "OvaHimba", which means "beggars", Chief Nguzu realises that their only hope lies with his grandson, Omusu. Thus, Omusu is sent to school in Ohopoho (capital of Kaokoland), where he learns English, grows in faith and, at a nearby army camp, comes into contact with the mystical art of karate. Chief Nguzu has a clear strategy in mind for the future of his tribe and his grandson. He envisages Omusu as the leader of the OvaHimba - a leader that will save his tribe from extinction. Nguzu had failed to fulfil this role himself, and has suffered from guilt all his life. Now struggling to survive in a barren wasteland. Nguzu hopes that Omusu will lead his people out of their life-threatening predicament.

However, Omusu is forced into confrontation with the elders of the tribe regarding their customs, when his best friend is killed by an evil man named Omurue. When he dares to question the workings of the prevailing judicial system, he is banished from his village. Alone, but determined, he sets off on a journey across the desert to the capital city, Windhoek, where he becomes a karate expert. Due to his natural talent and exceptionally fast reflexes, he is afforded the opportunity of a lifetime- to join the Kaokoland karate team who will participate in the USA International Championships.

After the championships, he travels back to his tribe to reclaim his fiancée and new-born child, before they can fall victim to his arch-enemy, Omurue. After having defeated Omurue in combat, he is hailed as a hero and becomes the new leader of the OvaHimba tribe. Omusu now faces the same challenge as his grandfather did years before - to inspire and lead his people to become the proud and prosperous tribe they once were.

### **BEHIND THE SCENES**

The story of the making of A Fire in Africa is arguably as intriguing as the film itself. Any filmmaker who has attempted to produce a low-budget feature film will identify with director Darrell Roodt's words following his first low-budget feature film, Place of Weeping (1986): "Everything is against you."

While produced in South Africa on a shoe-string budget, A Fire in Africa was mostly shot on location in Namibia over 17 days by aspiring student-filmmakers who had limited knowledge of filmmaking and even less experience in feature-film production. The film was shot in five locations (Ohopoho, Gobabis, Goanikontes Oasis, Dune Seven near Walvis Bay, and the ghost town of Kolmanskop, near Lüderitz Bay), and the average distance travelled by each of the three production vehicles (two VW Kombis and a BMW) was 9 500 km (35% more than what was budgeted for).

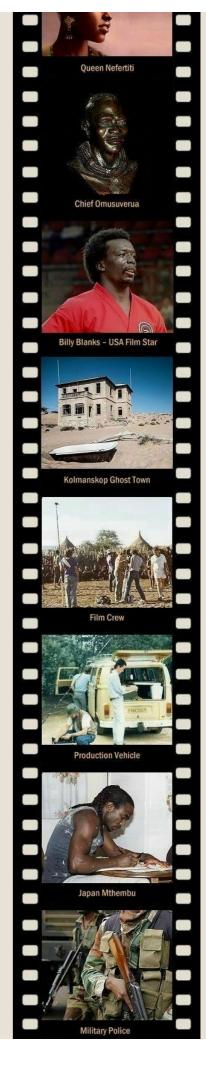
The pre-production period (from 10 January to 11 June 1987) proceeded without any mishaps. However, Murphy's Law (anything that can go wrong, will go wrong) was to plague the entire production phase. In June 1987, a crew of 13 filmmakers and two actors set off separately from Pretoria on a journey of 2 500 km that took 30 hours of non-stop travelling to reach Ohopoho. The first vehicle left on 12 June and arrived safely in the capital, while the second vehicle (the Camera Kombi with a trailer) left on the afternoon of 15 June and the last vehicle was due to depart with the producer and the main actor, who had to have his hair specially braided for his role, on16 June.

However, on the morning of 16 June the producer received a phone call informing him that the main actor had been involved in a car accident and was in hospital with serious injuries. While searching for a replacement, the producer was stopped by police at a roadblock into Alexandra Township and refused entry because of rioting. It was "Soweto Day" (16 June) 1987, and according to them, his life would be in danger should he enter the township. Upon his return to the production house, the telephone rang with more bad news. The Camera Kombi's trailer wheels had snapped off their hubs due to the weight of the film equipment and the driver had surprisingly only realised it after14 km of driving, when he started seeing sparks in his rear-view mirror.

Very early the next morning, still desperate to find a replacement for the main actor, the producer called Japan Mthembu, who had been the first choice for the role but had not been contracted because of budget constraints. Fortunately, according to the producer, Japan was half-asleep, and he agreed to help out whilst keeping his fee within the limited budget. Thus, "at considerable extra cost", the initial problems were solved. However, on the day that filming was due to commence, three members of what was essentially a skeleton crew were struck down with diarrhoea and unable to get out of bed. While this and several other hiccups provided some "lonely moments" for the director, one aspect that saved the production was the idealistic belief of the student crew that "everything will be all right on the night".

As this was the time of the Border War (South African Defence Force versus South West Africa People's Organisation), the filmmakers were cautioned by the SA Army to avoid by-roads because landmines could have been buried beneath them. The problem was that the village where filming was to be done could be reached only via a desolate road. Fortunately, no landmines were detonated but everyone was aware of the danger-including the OvaHimba, who were among the film crew, carrying AK47 machine guns for protection. Filming proceeded while all fervently hoped that nothing serious would befall them.

A few days into filming, Military Police came to arrest the producer late at night because the army had received intelligence that the film crew were seen filming "military installations" - a practice they had been explicitly warned against. The MPs fortunately opted instead to confiscate the roll of "exposed" film which they believed contained the prohibited footage. What they did not know was that one of the crew members, sensing trouble, had cunningly labelled a film can containing



an unexposed left-over piece of film as "military vehicle scene". The can was confiscated, the MPs were fooled and the scene survived. To this day it remains in the film.

Due to the costs incurred by these unforeseen problems, most of the crew had to return to Pretoria, leaving only the director, director of photography (DOP) and camera assistant to film the last Namibia scene (Kolmanskop). By then, the production had degenerated into a silent film because there was no sound engineer on site.

During Phase 2 (filming in South Africa), things went more smoothly, but Murphy was not quite done with the production. One evening, a day before the filming of the karate championship was due to start at the University of Pretoria's Sports Centre, the producer was told that the actor who was cast in the role of the Kaokoland karate team captain was no longer available as he had received a lucrative offer from an American film company and simply absconded. The director, who was the only one left on the crew who had not already been cast in some small acting role or as an extra,had a brown belt in karate, so he had no choice but to step in. Due to his squeaky voice, which sounded nothing like that of a karate expert, this scene had to be dubbed-a task that was eventually completed during the restoration of the film.

As is often the case with low-budget feature films, the editing phase became a casualty ward for all the mistakes made during the production phase. At one point, frustrated and overwhelmed by the sheer number of technical problems, the editor decided to abandon the project. Thankfully, after some careful coaxing by the assistant director, he was persuaded to continue. In addition to the many technical, acting and lighting problems, the silent Kolmanskop scene also came back to haunt the editor. All the sound, including Japan's many footsteps in the sand, had to be realistically recreated in a sound studio. After countless hours and numerous Foley (re-created sound effects) experiments, it was finally discovered that a Koki pen being pressed into a mixture of Horlicks and salt most accurately emulated this distinctive sound. In the end, the editing took longer than the pre-production and production phases combined.

In addition to the challenges, filming also had its amusing moments, thanks mostly to the creativity and good nature of the crew. One such moment occurred while they were first crossing the border from South Africa into Namibia. Art director Jan du Toit had created a life-size dummy of a man (for use in filming the attack at the water-hole), which was strapped to the roof of the Kombi. When the only border guard on duty asked whether they had anything to declare, Jan, who was very proud of his creation, spotted an opportunity to have some fun. Pointing at the dummy, he informed the guard that they were en route to a funeral and in a great hurry to get his deceased brother underground before he started decomposing in the heat of the desert sun. The friendly guard unexpectedly looked very concerned and, in an attempt to assist with their "serious predicament", agreed that they should depart right away. Not knowing whether to laugh or confess, the filmmakers thanked the guard, drove off and burst into laughter the moment they were out of earshot.

When filmmakers are faced with a seriously low budget, they are forced to rely heavily upon creativity. For example, since there was no budget to transport a Himba actor and his goats from Ohopoho to Gobabis (where wild lions had been reserved) the scene of the Himba spearing the lion was filmed in three different locations and later edited together in the hope that it would look believable. The storyboard had to be very accurate in terms of screen-direction, direction of the sun and time of day. The shot of the Himba throwing his spear was, in fact filmed in Ohopoho, 1 000 km from where the spear is then seen travelling through the air outside Gobabis, and some 50 kilometres further from where the lion is "struck by the spear". The spear seen "travelling through the air" was in reality static, apart from an assistant holding it up against the blue sky and emulating its trajectory. The illusion of its flight through the air was created by production assistants running past in the background with tree branches and the camera recording the shot

Of course, not all the scenes in the film were staged - some were, in fact, very real, for example the slaughtering of the ox. Having been briefed by the Herero assistant director (Johannes Muharukua) on exactly what was to happen, the director and DOP decided not to interfere in any way with the slaughtering and the subsequent prediction of the future of the tribe in the veins of the ox. The DOP (Chris Schutte) said that the only way to do this was to "grab shots" (select and film whenever the opportunity arose). The Himba butchers were instructed to proceed when the camera was ready to roll. The ox was caught, strangled and skinned, and Chris recorded whatever he saw as useful. Once the skin was completely removed, the witchdoctor and some of the men inspected the veins in order to predict what the future held for the Himba tribe.

After the scene had been filmed, the director, not understanding Herero, asked Johannes what the witchdoctor had predicted, and Johannes explained that the prediction was that a well-known chief in a nearby village would die in a few days' time. Being sceptics, the crew did not pay any attention to the prediction, but sure enough, when the crew arrived at the village three days later, Johannes informed them that no filming could take place that day because the Himbas were mourning the death of the chief of the nearby village who had, in fact, died that very day.

# REVENUE

A Fire in Africa was distributed in black townships in Gauteng and an abridged version of 59 minutes was licensed to the then SABC TV2and TV3 for dubbing into isiZulu and Sesotho. The film, which had a budget of R64 000, eventually cost R80 000 to produce. The SABC contributed R15 000, but ironically, creating an abridged version for television also cost R15 000. The film earned R600 000 at the box office, R80 000 subsidy and R15 000 from SABC licensing, totalling R695 000. Nickelodeon received a total income of R95 000, so the movie broke even, which, compared to the dismal performance of low-budget films produced around the world, is a great achievement.

Having not received any portion of the R600 000 box-office income from the distributor, the producer objected, without much hope of success or sympathy. Elaborating on how she was actually doing him a favour, the distributor told the producer that she would much rather walk



across the road and rent Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* for exhibition, as this would earn her much more than a low-budget film like *A Fire in Africa*. As unpalatable as the practice was, Nickelodeon had to accept the ruling, as it could not receive any state subsidy without documentary proof from the distributor that the film had been distributed as required by the system.

### **CAST AND CREW**

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The leading role was filled by Japan Mthembu. It was his first appearance in a feature film, before he went on to land roles in *A Far Off Place* (1993), *Snake Island* (2002) and Clint Eastwood's Oscar-nominated *Invictus* (2009), which tells the true story of newly-elected President Nelson Mandela's role in inspiring the Springboks to win the 1995 Rugby World Cup.

The role of Orlog, a karate instructor at an army camp during the Border War of 1966-1990, is played by well-known actor Rod Alexander. With past roles in films like *Kaptein Caprivi* (1972), *Snip en Rissiepit* (1973) and *Aanslag op Kariba* (1973), Rod has received a total of 14 credits for feature films, with *French Toast* being the most recent in 2015.

An interesting aspect of the casting is the first cameo appearance of the now world-famous actor and martial arts expert Billy Blanks. Blanks was part of the USA Karate Team depicted in the international karate championship scenes of *A Fire in Africa*. A seven-time karate world champion, he went on to play the leading role in many high-budget US feature films. Blanks acted in more than 50 movies starring with world-famous actors like Bruce Willis and Jean-Claude van Damme.

A Fire in Africa was writer Emil Kolbe's first feature-film script. He went on to write several screenplays for film and TV, including the script for American Kickboxer. This former newspaper sub-editor currently lives in Sydney, where he writes novels under the pen name Neil Colby, and his works include Kidnap, published by Amazon.com.

The film was produced and directed by Dr Gerhard Uys, who eventually became the first filmmaker in South Africa to obtain a doctorate in Motion Picture Production. Uys, who lectured at and became the head of the Technikon Pretoria Film School, established Nickelodeon Films in 1083

Although the production team consisted of only 13 people working in collaboration with three professional actors, the film was saved from collapse because of the invaluable assistance, mostly without compensation, received from many people. Some64OvaHimba, 29 OvaHerero, and 14 soldiers were involved in making the film, while 18 sponsors assisted to reduce the costs and some 80 karateka from the Japan Karate Association, friends and family also contributed. Twenty-nine people worked on the restoration of the academic and director's versions, bringing the total number of people involved in the making of *A Fire in Africa* up to 250.

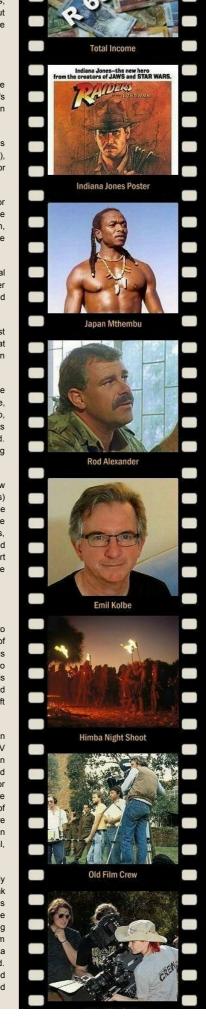
Since the budget for *A Fire in Africa* would only allow for three professional actors, all crew members also, quite literally, had to "play their parts". The production manager (Charles Biggs) played the priest, the first assistant director (Johannes Muharukua) was the schoolteacher, the second assistant director (Titus) played the part of Kaskole, the director (Gerhard Uys) was the Kaokoland karate team captain, the sound engineer (Pieter Rosseau) was the farmer at the oasis, the 2ndDOP (Frans Nel) was also the farmer (in a close-up shot), the art director (Jan du Toit) and assistant director (Francois Human)were members of the karateka, the security manager (Albert Monyela) was the army security guard, the technical adviser (Frank Ferreira) was the karate championship announcer and the camera assistant (Alex Ross) was the USA TV commentator.

# 34 YEAR STRUGGLE

The producer of A Fire in Africa, after spending three years working towards his Master's, failed to obtain the qualification because the government subsidy system, which formed the foundation of the study, was terminated, and with it the study. The study's main objective had been to learn as much as possible about the entire process of filmmaking, from the development of the concept to the distribution of the film. Surrender was not an option, so the producer started from scratch, this time avoiding a topic that could be stifled by any system. Choosing a similar research topic would have been a duplication of knowledge, as the thesis in any event already existed, albeit in draft form - which, ironically, was arguably as valuable as the completed study would have been.

Being a student for life (Uys had by then successfully completed five post-matric qualifications in teaching, communication and filmmaking) he enrolled for a Master's degree in Film and TV production, switching his topic from producing to scriptwriting. When asked what his motivation was for choosing this topic, Uys explained that the success of all great movies could be traced back to the quality of their foundation - that is, their screenplays. He quoted Alfred Hitchcock, for whom the three most important elements of a successful movie were "the script, the script and the script" and Richard Walter (Screenwriting, 1988), who said that the three most important facets of story-craft were "the structure, the structure and the structure". This topic is without doubt the core of feature film production and its value cannot be overestimated. Uys enrolled for his doctorate in 2004 and obtained it seven years later, which resulted in him now having completed, in total, seven post-matric qualifications.

During this time Uys wrote several screenplays, one of which (*Frankie's Flyer*) was sold to Grundy TV in Australia and the SABC. A literary agent in London, Julian Friedmann, M-Net and Peak Viewing all responded positively to the screenplay. M-Net's assessor wrote: "Based on fact, this local story is quaint and highly entertaining. It is a nicely worked screenplay which can hardly be faulted." Peak Viewing's script assessor was also impressed when he reported: "It's a fascinating story - true life? Good Lord. Wonderful story in fact." Sadly, Murphy had returned to the system with buy-outs, policy changes and the lot, resulting in the screenplay never being turned into a film. The truth in the saying, "He who controls the distribution, controls the industry," prevailed. After 34 years of struggling to collaborate in the production of a feature film that truly reflected passion for this art form, Uys retired and accepted things the way they were- until an unexpected opportunity arose.



### RESTORATION

A Fire in Africa lay incomplete for 30 years until the family of Sensei Albert Brelage, who played the American karate team captain, contacted Nickelodeon to request a VHS copy of the film, which they wanted to give him for his 80th birthday. Unfortunately, no watchable copy existed, apart from the SABC versions dubbed into isiZulu and Sesotho, so it was decided that the negative film stored at the National Film, Video and Sound Archives would be used to produce a good-quality digital copy of the film. According to the producer, the original copy contained "unspeakable weak points", so Gerhard and Frank decided to use the opportunity to correct some

While they were reminiscing about the "good old days at the film school" with their former boss, Fanie van der Merwe, over lunch, the restoration of the film came up. Fanie informed them that his wife, Laura, at the time a lecturer at the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance (AFDA), was searching for a project to restore as the practical requirement for her MFA (Master's degree in Fine Arts). This stroke of luck (or fate) meant that Laura and another AFDA lecturer, Mark Buyskes, got involved in what soon evolved into an academically based "restoration and re-visioning" of the film to an HD digital format. The deal with Laura and Mark was that, should all go well with their studies, they would produce a director's version for possible distribution.

After two years of restoration, Laura and Mark presented their Value Added Learner Assessment (VALA) to a panel of academics, which included Prof Keyan Tomaselli, author of the book *The S.A. Film Industry*. After a gruelling session of some three hours, Laura and Mark were informed that they had passed their VALA with distinction. Prof Tomaselli requested an invitation to the premiere of their restored version, which in itself was high praise. On 24 November 2017 the academic version of the film premiered at Ster-Kinekor, Cinema Nouveau in Rosebank, during AFDA's annual awards evening, and both candidates obtained their Master's degrees.

This, in turn, led to the creation of a fully restored director's version, which had to be of sufficient quality to make distribution a real possibility. As all professional film producers should, this producer tried to obtain a distribution deal first, but after more than a year's correspondence with a prominent agent in Los Angeles, no deal had been signed as the producer knew better than to risk it all on a flimsy "trust-me" deal.

The problem of "risky distribution" was then discussed with Etienne Marais, an IT specialist and former Technikon Pretoria Film School student, who incidentally also worked on the film back in 1987. Etienne suggested the development of a dedicated website that would allow pay-per-view viewing. This platform was agreed upon on condition that it would not exclude possible licensing to TV stations, as was the case when the film was first released, and the website was designed.

When setting out to produce a feature film, nobody knows exactly what the outcome of the project will be. During production, this uncertainty often brings up the dreaded decision to "pull the plug", a prospect faced twice by *A Fire in Africa*. The key problem was, as always, the limited budget, which prohibited the hiring of a professional post-production facility to create a professional "look and feel", which would no doubt be a requirement of potential film and TV distributors. The decision to invest considerably more money in the restoration came about when M-Net and Indigenous Film Distribution, after seeing the trailers on the website, asked to view the completed production. Licensing (selling) the movie had become a real possibility.

The restoration of the film, which mostly entailed editing, took four years to complete, while the entire production of the original version had only taken two years. The editing of the restored director's version also cost substantially more than the entire original production, with the video editor, Neels Smit, earning more than anybody else involved in the project. The reason for this was that Neels was able to not only restore but add production value by way of editing, CGI, sound design, and colourisation. Ironically, the outbreak of Covid-19 afforded Neels much more editing time than is usually the case. It is quite possibly this extra year that gave the movie the extraordinary level of technical refinement that it ultimately achieved.

Another pressing concern was the newly created back-story of the film, which was mostly constructed using stock shots and still photographs. Neels committed himself to transforming the most problematic material (stills) in a way that would be more suitable to the drama film genre. One such example in the film is the shot of a boy offering a slice of orange to his mother while sitting at a campfire in the desert. The shot, which was actually a still photograph taken 32 years earlier, was brought to life by Neels, who inserted flickering flames into the fire, complete with cinders floating in the air, and illuminated the boy slowly looking up at his mother. When viewing the scene, the observer's brain is tricked by the flames, cinders, and slight movement of the boy's head to believe that it is a moving image and not a still photograph.

The re-visioning created its own problems because returning to Namibia with a crew to film additional back-story scenes was simply not financially viable, so again creativity was required. Laura suggested that her daughter, Louise van der Merwe, who was at the time a student at AFDA, film some of the new scenes that were required. Louise, assisted by some of her fellow students and the restoration crew, filmed these scenes in a student car park at AFDA in Johannesburg. By carefully avoiding the many buildings around them, they successfully created the attack on the Himbas by Nama gangs and the robbing of their jewellery.

One positive development easily breeds another, so it was decided to re-create the climax sequence to make the ending of the movie more impressive. This sequence, with its use of green-screen techniques and helicopter flight, was complicated. With the contracting of DOP Grant Waterston, sound engineer Warren Frense, second-unit camera Alexis Basson, and production assistants Umesh Ranchod and Louise van der Merwe, the movie started looking less like a low-budget effort and more like a decently funded production. I have been requested not to divulge anything more about the ending, as it may result in what "Hollywood" refers to as a spoiler.



During any movie's post-production phase, one needs to preview the progressing final cut versions in a professional cinema, in order to see the picture and hear the sound the way a cinema audience would. There was no budget to hire a professional cinema, but, by luck, the technical adviser, Frank Ferreira, had just constructed a professional-quality twelve-seater cinema in his home. Having lectured in sound and technology for many years, Frank knew how to design and construct a beautiful cinema with superb projection quality that allowed the team to identify small technical audio and visual glitches that were inaudible or invisible in a standard editing suite.

Another problem arose with the two protagonists' voices, which were required in additional scenes. As the lead actors were now 34 years older, their voices would no longer sound as they had in the original dialogue and narration. The producer decided to follow the same procedure as British director David Lean had when restoring his film Lawrence of Arabia (1962) in 1989.Lean's technique entailed using the same actors (Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif and Alec Guinness) for dubbing, although they were 25 years older (double their age when filming took place). So, after carefully recording and equalising the lead actors' voices, Richard Hedges, sound engineer at Lion Mountain Media, assisted by voice-coach specialist Prof Marth Munro, managed to match their voices as recorded now with their voices as recorded 34 years earlier. Astoundingly, a human being's voice, once matured, hardly changes over that period.

Moviemaking is a collaborative enterprise in which the producer plays a pivotal role. Fanie van der Merwe, the restoration producer, with his extensive knowledge of all facets of the motion picture production process, was perfectly suited for his position. It was under his leadership that many former students of the Pretoria Technikon Film School went on to achieve great successes in film industries around the world. Three of the more than 20 internationally recognised filmmakers trained and mentored by Fanie include Stanley Roup, who produced actor Jean-Claude van Damme's Wake of Death; Dion Beebe, DOP of the movie Chicago and winner of many Oscars; and Roger Hyde, Vice President of DIRECTV in New York, whose movies have garnered more than 250 international awards. Fanie, who is also the producer of many National Geographic wildlife documentaries, played a critical role in guiding the restored production to its objective. His contribution, most notably in terms of a nature and wildlife ambience, is clearly visible throughout the film.

Geo Höhn, a German composer living in South Africa, was contracted to redo and extend the music for the film. In addition to his artistic abilities and vast experience in creating feature film music, he has extensive knowledge of the OvaHimba tribe and their music, having grown up in Namibia. In the same way that the screenwriter had focused on creating the story with words, Geo was tasked with telling the same story through music. To re-create the OvaHimba music as authentically as possible, instruments that had been used by the Herero in north-east Africa as far back as the Egyptian era were researched. Once the music track had been added and mixed together with the language and sound effects, the dramatic impact of the film was raised to the desired level.

# RECOGNITION

Recognition is due to the original production crew, who were meant toget a share of the profit, but sadly received no remuneration thanks to an unfair system. It's ironic that those who had worked so hard for two years to produce the film earned nothing, while the distributors earned R600 000 for simply shipping and screening the film.

PG du Plessis (script adviser), Eddy Dorey (Sensei Becker), Annaliese du Preez (production manager), Chris Schutte (DOP) and Hester Lamprecht (production assistant), who have all passed away, are hereby given the recognition they deserve, along with Malcolm Gooding, the "man with the golden voice", who recorded voice-overs for free right up to the completion of the director's version in 2021. Malcolm, incidentally, was the master of ceremonies at the 1995 Rugby World Cup, when the Springbok team was finally able to exact their revenge by beating the world champions, the All Blacks. Malcolm fondly recounts how he was tasked with introducing former president Nelson Mandela, who would be handing the cup over to Francois Pienaar, the Springbok captain. When Madiba, under deafening noise from the record 45 000-strong crowd, who had all recognised their newly elected and beloved president, asked Malcolm who he was, he replied, "Good day, Mister President. I am Malcolm Gooding. I am here to introduce you." Madiba's quick-witted response was, "Do you think I need to be introduced?"

# TRAGEDY

While the restoration of the film was still in progress, the producer published four trailers of different lengths on YouTube in the hope that this would arouse interest among film and TV distributors. M-Net and Indigenous Film Distribution viewed the trailers and requested a viewing copy of the film. This response from distributors who would normally ignore unsolicited projects encouraged the producer to raise the film's darmatic impact by increasing the budget. The additional budget would be used mainly to create the climactic ending, which was missing from the original version because it ran out of budget. This idea led to the re-engagement of the two main actors, who, 30 years after the original movie had been filmed, were still around and keen to take part.

The original scriptwriter, Emil Kolbe, was tracked down in Australia and agreed, as he put it, to "complete unfinished business" for free. The climactic ending that was created involved Chief Omusu taking his mentor and karate instructor, Orlog, on a trip to Kaokoland to see for himself how the OvaHimba had progressed. This journey could only be done by helicopter, so the producers approached Kitty Hawk Aerodrome in Pretoria for assistance. Christo de Bruin, a pilot who owned a Bell Jet Ranger helicopter, responded enthusiastically that he and his son, Christiaan, also an accomplished pilot, would act as Omusu's pilots taking the two of them on a site-seeing trip to Kaokoland. Hiring a helicopter usually costs more than R20 000 per hour, and it took a full day to film the scene. But Christo adamantly refused payment. His kindness to us, and to everybody else who knew him, was astonishing.



A few months later, while preparing to film the last scene of the movie, the producer was informed of a tragic accident near Grand Central Airport in Midrand. As Christo and his wife, Tarina, were coming in to land - in the very same helicopter that had been used in the filming - a gust of wind threw the tail of the helicopter upwards, with the result that Christo lost control of the aircraft. The Jet Ranger hit the ground and burst into flames. Christo and Tarina sadly died on impact.

When the Covid-19 virus arrived in South Africa and Lockdown Alert Level 5 was introduced on 1 May 2020, the production faced many challenges. Filming the end sequence where Orlog (played by Rod Alexander) visits the minister (played by Japan Mthembu) could only be done in circumstances that ensured the safety of the cast and crew. The film locations (Rietondale Lodge and Topolansky Fine Furniture) had to be "fogged" (spraying disinfectant) together with all the camera, sound and lighting equipment to prevent the transfer of the virus. A compliance officer was contracted to be present on set during filming to ensure that everybody involved, adhered to safety regulations. Fortunately, to the relief of the producer who was responsible for the safety of everybody involved in the filming, nobody was infected.

Ironically, more than a year later when South Africa was, due to infections declining dramatically from some 22,000 per day to less than a 1,000 and Lockdown Alert Level 1 was introduced, tragedy stuck once again. The film was in its final stage of completion with only about one week's work remaining to complete the final sound mix, which was done by Geo Höhn who had also composed the music. Towards the end of September 2021, the producer received an SMS from Geo informing him that he had contracted the virus. A few days later Geo was admitted to hospital where his condition steadily improved until he was eventually taken off CPAP. Sadly, Geo's condition suddenly deteriorated and on 7 October 2021 he died.

### **EXPECTATIONS**

According to Forbes, 80 per cent of professionally produced feature films in the USA lose money, so the prospect of a low-budget African indie film like *A Fire in Africa* being a financial failure always loomed large in the minds of those behind the project. Before starting work on the movie, the producer attended a short course presented by well-known American film producer Dov Simens (Quintin Tarantino's film teacher) to learn as much as possible about increasing the chances of success for his planned project. Simens unfortunately did not offer much cause for optimism: he stated that 90 per cent of all indie films don't even get theatrical release, and the odds of a low-budget indie film being a success are 1 in 30 (3.3%). Another source puts this percentage as low as 1%, meaning that the chances of failure were close to 100%.

The dismal performance of independently produced films is a complicated issue for a number of reasons. The most important one is that the USA, as well as many other film-producing countries, for that matter, is basically not interested in any product that competes with any of its own industries, whether China's IT products or films from foreign countries. At the bottom end of the film industry spectrum is the "low-life" foreign indie film, so this restored version may be on a collision course with misfortune.

Despite not having a distribution deal locked in beforehand, the original version of *A Fire in Africa* grossed more than seven times its budget. This may be because no US distribution agents were involved and the producer worked closely with the TV acquisitions executive and the South African film distributor. Inonically, this did not help much, because the South African film distributor had a grossly unfair system on her side, resulting in Nickelodeon not receiving any portion of the box office income.

# THE X-FACTOR

While pre-viewing the director's version of the film, it struck me that, although it is not big-budget material, it does not project a low-budget image and has, as Malcolm Gooding puts it, "a nice African feel". In a global film market saturated with mediocre products, *A Fire in Africa's* unpretentious narrative and use of cinematic techniques like figurative comparisons (motifs, symbols and metaphors) are refreshing.

I, in fact, experienced the film as captivating, and this apparent contradiction puzzled me until I interviewed the director. Uys explained that a movie can sometimes fail because it suffers from "a bad case of dollars". An adequate budget, admittedly essential, is no guarantee of success. Relying on money alone to produce a good movie is a risky business. As unreasonable as it may seem, a shot of a tear running down a child's cheek can be as dramatic as a shot of an out-of-control train speeding down a hill. Assuming that the more spectacular and expensive a scene, the more dramatic it will be, is, quite literally, losing the plot - in movies, context is everything. Who would have thought that Steven Spielberg is high on the list of the greatest financial failures in the history of USA cinema (*Empire of the Sun, 1941, The BFG, Twilight Zone, Always*)?

There simply exists, Uys insisted, a critical X-factor that is paramount to the success of a movie, namely *dramatic impact*. If the director does not have an adequate budget, he or she had better pray for the only other lifeline- creativity. The level of creativity determines the dramatic impact, which in turn determines the audience's emotional response, which in turn determines the success of the movie. The creative input may increase or decrease the movie's dramatic impact, depending upon how the subject matter is treated. Uys was very emphatic about this, adding that "it's the treatment that counts, not the budget or even the subject matter per se".

The film director, Uys explained, is not only responsible for his or her individual contribution, but also for the cast and crew's treatment of the content. Although most film directors may scoff at the view that the cast and crew's input in the success of a movie supersedes that of the director, the truth is that the director generally cannot act, design sets, do cinematography, record sound, edit, compose music, and so on. This fact requires the director to be more of a supervisor than the sole creator or true "author" as was popularised in the mid-1950s by the French auteur theory.

The treatment of the screenplay involves many artistic codes - production design, acting, cinematography, lighting, sound design, editing, visual effects, music, and so forth, essentially



# EX-FACTOR CONCLUSION CONCLUSION CONCLUSION

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created, not by the director, but by the cast and crew. All these codes, to a greater or lesser extent, have an emotional impact upon the audience- most of them on a subconscious level.

"If you want to find the solution to your puzzlement, Ms Somerset," Uys concluded, "you need to understand how the audience is psychologically affected by the fact that the many artistic codes designed for the creation of a movie - whether simply for aesthetic or mostly for purposeful reasons -always adhere to the unwritten rule in moviemaking, namely that technique is meaningful only in terms of the subject matter. You may want to start by viewing the video 'Directing Techniques' on our website."

I did exactly that, and after doing more research, including reading Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Movies*, a new world opened up for me, especially in terms of how infinitely complex great movies are, for example, Coppola's *The Godfather*, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*.

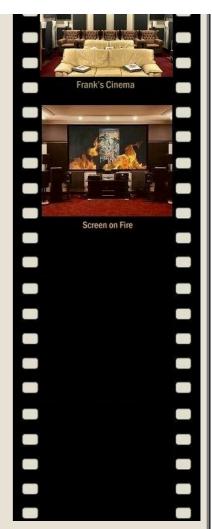
### CONCLUSION

The strongest argument in favour of *A Fire in Africa*- the one that persuaded me to write this article -is the number of successes it has achieved, against the odds, which justifies it being given a second lease on life in its new digital format.

The four most striking aspects are that:

- 1. It is the first full-length student feature film produced in South Africa that was sold to two TV channels
- It is, according to my research, the lowest-budget film ever to have been produced by any country in a foreign country.
   Apart from having, as Malcolm Gooding puts it: "A nice African feel" the film also, has a
- Apart from having, as Malcolm Gooding puts it: "A nice African feel" the film also, has a
  deeper philosophical level and because of the dynamic stills techniques, a unique visual
  finesse.
- 4. It is the first time in the history of filmmaking that the filming of a storyline with a break of 34 years has been resumed after an actual break of 34 years, so that the two principal actors (Japan Mthembu and Rod Alexander) are, in fact, 34 years older and consequently required no make-up or prosthetics to simulate this passage of time.

In the final analysis, the treatment of the subject matter is skilfully integrated with the enigmatic story statement, and the subject matter is further enriched by a diversity of cinematic techniques, all of which align to create a visceral and unforgettable experience. This newly restored and upgraded digital version of *A Fire in Africa* will, without doubt, earn respect and praise from film students, critics and connoisseurs.



# **NICKELODEON FILMS**