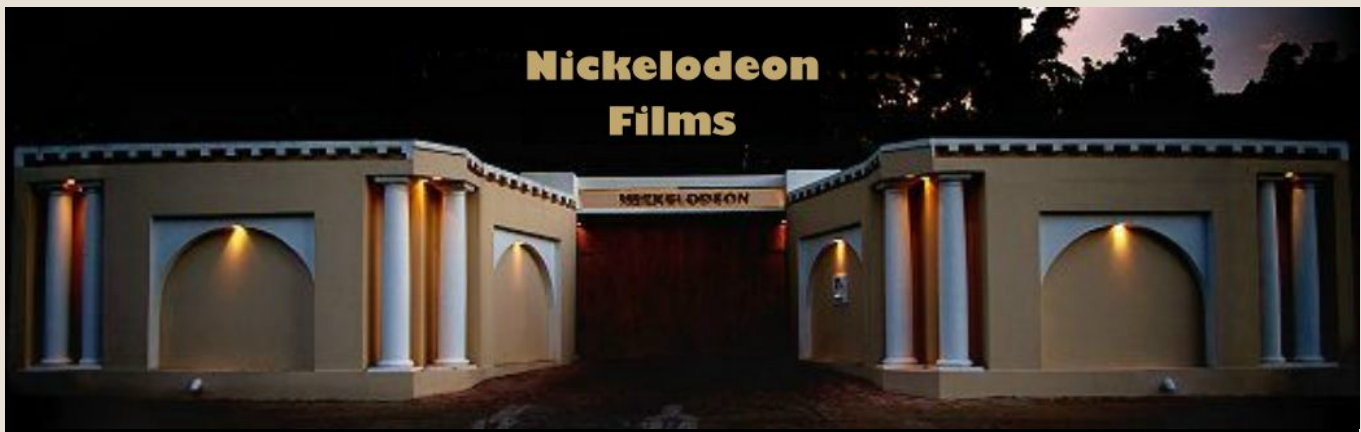




# Media Release



## 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 subsidy.



Newspaper Articles



Emil Kolbe (Scriptwriter)



Dr. Uys Graduates



INTRODUCTION INTRODUCTION INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND BACKGROUND BACKGROUND SYNOPSIS SYNOPSIS SYNOPSIS



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 in fast motion.

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 TV2 and 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



Filming at Tukkies



Billy Blanks Scores



Film Editor



Steenbeck 8-Plate Editing Suite



Jan du Toit (Art Director)



Himba Spearing Lion



Ox-slaughter









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 struck 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. Ironically, 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

Pilots Christo & Christiaan



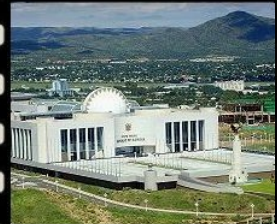
Kitty Hawk Security Briefing



JetRanger Take-off



Tragedy on 17 June 2020



Namibia State House



Omusu & Orlog 30 Years Later



Japan Mthembu



Rod Alexander



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.
2. It is, according to my research, the lowest-budget film ever to have been produced by any country in a foreign country.
3. 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.



Frank's Cinema



Screen on Fire

NICKELODEON FILMS

\*\*\*