

LIFE ON LOCATION

A FILM INDUSTRY IS GROWING IN THIS EAST-AFRICAN NATION. DEBBIE LINCOLN FOUND THREE DISTINCT EXAMPLES OF HOW KENYA IS GROWING BOTH IN POPULARITY AS A FILM LOCATION, AND AS A SOURCE OF GREAT STORIES AND SOME REMARKABLY CREATIVE MINDS

KENYA ON SCREEN



THE MESSAGE OF PEACE in *Ni Sisi!* is relevant across Africa, and the rest of the world

A BAND of Danish film professionals has been travelling back and forth to Kenya for some years now, not for one project, but for several. So what is the pulling power of this East African nation for production crews from Scandinavia? Something is certainly working well, and Pontact Productions, headed up by Jenny Pont, which offers production services for film, TV, documentary or commercials projects in Kenya, is profiting from this collaboration. It's not hard to highlight the attractions of Kenya, the fabulous landscapes and people, but also the fact that the local film industry has grown in recent years has resulted in a source of technicians, actors and crews with growing experience. Historically much of the filming in East Africa has been in the documentary and natural history genre, but Pont points to lesser-known assets, for example modern city

locations, beaches, mountains, Arab culture and the potential for exterior set building. The latest project from this fruitful Danish/Kenyan connection is *A Hijacking* (2012) — *Kapringen* in Danish — a feature film that tackles the consequences of a hijacking at sea. Director and writer Tobias Lindholm, who's father was a seaman, has long been fascinated by the lives of seafarers, and has strong memories of the news of Danish freighters falling victim to pirates. Despite the subject this is not an action movie, as Lindholm homes in on the emotional drama of the characters. The story follows the cargo ship *MV Rozen*, staffed with an international crew looking forward to reaching harbour, when it is hijacked by Somali pirates in the Indian Ocean. Negotiation involving the demand for millions of dollars between the CEO of the shipping company, played by Søren Malling, and the

Somali pirates forms the psychological drama at the centre of this film, and particularly the emotional torture of ship's cook Mikkel (Pilou Asbæk) as he is held hostage for months, desperately wanting to get home to his wife and young child.

"Pontact had lately been involved with several Scandinavian productions," Pont says. This includes Oscar and Golden Globe Best foreign language film winner *Hævnen* (*In A Better World*), *Kidnappet* (*Lost In Africa*), and an episode of the successful TV series *Börgeren*. "Coincidentally, Tobias Lindholm was one of the writers of that episode and the production manager, Maj-Britt Paulmann Dalsgaard vowed to return, and was true to her word, contacting me within the year with tentative enquiries about 'a pirate movie', on which she was line producer for Nordisk Film Production." This was

in May 2011, with a planned shoot in September/October that year. “We had a good feeling that this could be the right place to shoot *A Hijacking*,” Paulmann Dalsgaard says, adding: “There were several things that pointed us to Kenya. We wanted to find a place as near to where [piracy] actually happens as possible, to make the film as authentic as possible. And we needed to find the right ship and location.”

Pontact was tasked with a challenging shopping list in preparation for the Nordisk production. “They required a ship for three weeks shooting, of which four days would be at sea. We began by thinking big but cost and availability necessitated reducing our ambitious ideas. Within a very short time our ‘man in Malindi’ [a town on the Indian Ocean coast of Kenya, northeast of Mombasa], Han van Schooneveld, had identified a fleet of smaller ships whose owners were willing to consider hiring them out to us. Three of the fleet — sister ships built in Germany in the 1970s — had been victims of Somali pirates.”

One of the boats, MV Semlow, was held for 100 days before being released in 2005. “We were incredibly fortunate and privileged to spend an evening with the Semlow crew, all of whom still work for the company, to gain valuable research information,” Pont says. “And they eventually agreed to be part of the shoot as working extras. It proved impractical to anchor the ship in Mombasa Harbour for the shoot, mainly because of the very necessary strict security measures required to enter the port on a daily basis. “Han identified unused cement silos and a dock at English Point which was a stone’s throw from the luxury Tamarin Apartments where we accommodated the foreign crew. Things were taking shape,” Pont says. The final negotiations for the hire of the ship were between Nordisk and the ship owners, and Pont Productions put their efforts to other elements of the production, including local crew hire, casting, transportation, local equipment hire, accommodation, licensing and dealing with the local authorities, hire of weapons and local security, props and art department, and hire of costumes. But of course a ship with a film crew and cast of up to 70 people on board is itself a target for pirates, and special security arrangements had to be made that didn’t compromise the shooting. A more predictable problem shooting at sea is the never-ending swell. “The first day at sea, 90% of the Kenyan crew were seasick, including the unit nurse. However, most found their sea legs on the subsequent trips,” Pont says.

The local community not only benefited economically from the arrival of an international film production, but also experience was gained by local crews. “It was a great experience for everyone to work on a feature film with such a small and efficient crew,” Pont says. And the shoot had some



PILOU ASBÆK plays Mikkel, the ship’s cook, a valuable hostage for the Somali pirates who take control of MV Rozen in *A Hijacking*

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long-lasting benefits for the local community in coastal Kenya. “As well as a great understanding and bonding between our crew and Somali cast, the Danish crew visited some local orphanages and are still sponsoring some of the students’ education,” Pont says. Their new Danish friends also sent packages of football equipment from Denmark to supply Somali youth teams.

A mark of how the Kenyan government is keen to support filming in the country, by home-grown as well as international productions, is the fact that Peter Mutie, CEO of the Kenyan Film Commission, accompanied Jenny Pont on a recce day and visited the ship with his marketing manager. This interest was welcomed by Pont: “Kudos to Peter Mutie”. As well as an “ambitious” Kenyan production in the near future, Pontact Productions already has several undisclosed Scandinavian projects coming up, proving that whatever reasons there are for this fertile co-operation the production pipeline between Scandinavia and Kenya is still flourishing. *A Hijacking* has enjoyed a successful run of film festivals so far, winning honours and stellar reviews at Thessaloniki, Abu Dhabi, Toronto and Venice, and has secured sales deals around the world.

Jinna Mutune is a Kenyan filmmaker who has directed and produced short films, music videos and theatrical plays both in America and Africa. Her new film, *Leo*, bills itself as an adult fairy tale and is set in Nairobi, a bustling Kenyan city that is a melting pot of East African culture, art, politics and commerce. It is a story about a Maasai boy, raised in a low-income home, achieving his dream against all odds. Everyone around Leo thinks he has his head in the clouds, but a friendship with a

young American boy leads Leo to prove that superheroes can exist — not only in his imagination, but in reality. Director Mutune’s credentials include a degree from the South African School of Motion Picture Medium and Live Performance (AFDA, Cape Town, South Africa) and a course in Film Studies from the Houston Community College in Texas, US.

The timeline for the project is daunting, consisting of “eight months of writing, one and a half years of sourcing funding, 40 days of shooting and two years of marketing”. Mutune raised the money from three private investors. “Independent films are quite challenging. Limited funding pushed our team to be very resourceful,” she says. Mutune amassed a cast that mixed mature performers with some stunning debuts. Trevor Gitonga, in the title role, is a budding young actor with a string of theatrical and television projects behind him. In contrast his new pal in the film is played by young American Conor Ailin Lyons in his first movie role. Hollywood actor David Morin plays Conor’s hard-working, and distant, father; Kenyan actor Jeff Koinange plays the villain mired in corruption and injustice; and Gowi Odera plays Leo’s father who is determined that he will keep on a straight path, unlike his older brother Fela (Paddy Mwangi) who, although idolised by Leo, gets dragged into the seedy underbelly of city life. Debut actress Alice Odera plays Leo’s long-suffering mother, moving from laughter to tears in an effort to keep her family on track, and theatre actress Kui Maina plays Mona, a woman with a past desperate to find love and validation.

The film was shot entirely in Kenya, in downtown Nairobi, the Massai Mara and the slum towns of Kangemi and Ngong. All the crew was Kenyan apart from Abe Martinez, a Hollywood cinematographer who has extensive experience as a cameraman for movies including *Spider-Man 3* (2007), *Fast & Furious* (2009) and up-coming Tom Cruise-starrer *Oblivion* (2013). Making the most of having such experience in the crew, Mutune was keen

to bring education into the project. “The focus puller who worked under Abe Martinez was under an informal mentorship programme, and his cinematography skills greatly benefited. We also had a way of combining the heads of department with newbies in the industry,” she says. “African cinema is very young, so distribution for African stories is almost not there. It makes it quite challenging for a filmmaker who has a product but cannot easily find distribution channels. This is something we are still trying to figure out with Leo, and we hope we will have it easier with the next film,” Mutune says. However she is decidedly positive about her future and the future of her industry. “There is an African/Kenyan cultural renaissance that has created such a hub of innovative artists. The future is so bright for telling African stories outside the norm of poverty, war, and a famine-stricken continent.”

Film festivals in Africa have also blossomed. “They are so many I can’t quite keep up, but I look forward to Zanzibar Film Festival where I screened my first work as a filmmaker, and also FESPACO in West Africa, and Durban Film in South Africa,” she says. The future is certainly brighter for African filmmakers while there are young ambitious directors like Jinna Mutune, with eyes firmly on the future, minds focused on sourcing funds and an imagination tuned to finding new stories to tell. “I usually have so many stories running through my head ... as we promote Leo, I’m in pre-production with the second film.” The tagline for Leo is Dream, Dare, Believe, words that could apply to the work of Mutune.

In February 2013 feature film Ni Sisi! (It Is Us!) launched at the Australian High Commission in Nairobi before its theatrical release across Kenya, showings on TV and local screenings in the week leading up to the national election. The film is an adaptation of Kenyan NGO S.A.F.E.’s long-running street theatre play of the same name. It was decided that the drama should be put on screen for maximum exposure of the message of peace in response to fears of a repeat of the post-election violence of 2007/8 which resulted in the deaths of over 1,300 people and internal displacement of up to a further 750,000 people. Cutting between footage of the live stage play and filming on location, Ni Sisi! portrays a typical Kenyan community: a harmonious muddle of tribes, intermarriages, and extended families. When vicious rumours begin to spread, very quickly mistrust takes hold and friends who have lived and worked together all their lives start identifying others by tribe. Fear escalates and in a matter of days the foundations of the community are threatened. The film’s key aim, according to S.A.F.E.’s director of development, Sarah Kennedy, is to remind Kenyans that it is individuals who have the power to say no to the factors that caused the violence after the last



JINNA MUTUNE

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election, namely tribalism, rumours and corruption. It was important that the film could be seen by as many people as possible before the March election. This necessitated a production schedule that would make Hollywood studios green with envy. “We were invited to apply for the grant to make the film at the end of August. We started shooting in the middle of November, and then went into post-production at the very beginning of January. The film was released to cinemas on February 22,” Kennedy says.

S.A.F.E. executive director Nick Reding, who directed the movie, says: “Promoting peace is the most important project S.A.F.E. has ever undertaken. Violence threatens everyone in Kenya and undermines the work being done to overcome other social challenges such as HIV/AIDS. We hope as many people as possible see the film.”

Ni Sisi! features well-known actors from Kenyan stage and screen, including Jacky Vike and Joseph Babu Kimani, star of Nairobi Half Life (2012) and winner of Best Actor at Durban International Film Festival 2012. Kimani says: “Starring in Ni Sisi! has given me an opportunity to use my talent to make a difference and advocate for peace, reconciliation, co-existence and unity for my country. Ni Sisi! enhances and fosters our united Kenyan identity. Everyone has to spread that message. Ni Sisi!”

Ambitions for Ni Sisi! are still alive even though the election, that thankfully passed off peacefully, is over. “The messages in the film — anti-tribalism, anti-corruption, pro-peace — are relevant for so many other potential and post-conflict countries in Africa and across the world. The film was made to have universality in its peace message,” Kennedy says. “We will be submitting it to international film festivals.”

For the immediate future S.A.F.E. is not planning another film project, Kennedy says it would take too much time and energy away from the objectives of the charity. “What is next for S.A.F.E. is to get back to using performing arts and community programmes to educate, inspire and deliver social change. We will be devising a new performance about HIV/AIDS and hope to get funding to educate communities about public health issues: HIV prevention, sexual health, gender-based violence and treatment adherence.”

S.A.F.E.’s activities have been achieving results across Kenya since 2002. And S.A.F.E. has some cool friends and high-profile patrons, including actor Daniel Craig, who says: “S.A.F.E. does everything that an effective charity should do. It finds out what the problem is, works with communities to develop solutions, and it does it all in a way that makes sense to those involved. This is where change happens; this is where lives can be saved.” For more information about this film and the extraordinary work of this organisation check out www.safekenya.org ●