

FILM IN THE KAROO
and
'finding VERONICA'

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Heritage and culture have overlapping meanings. Heritage looks more toward the past; toward tradition and legacy.. it is related to the word inheritance. We're all aware of the need to preserve a heritage. Culture, on the other hand, also encompasses creativity, customs, and values. It is a living and evolving process at the core of an identity.

Karoo culture is in a fix. On the eve of desperately-needed development of the region.. its identity could be in danger of being steamrolled under a homogenizing global culture. As it is, Karoo identity is marginalized and insecure – seldom given any pride or place on the national stage. But the urge to preserve can suffocate or paralyze a fragile culture. While tourism justifiably wants to promote culture, it can also stultify in its need to commodify and package. The work that I have been doing in development of a couple of film projects has made me increasingly aware of the role that the medium can play in nurturing and bolstering a living Karoo culture.

In this discussion, I use the word 'film' in a generic sense: incorporating video and film, international features, local dramas, television, and documentaries. Each of these has very different needs and benefits.

Firstly, I would like to constructively dispel a couple of myths:

- That a region such as the Karoo can be marketed as a **FILM DESTINATION**
- That film can be a significant **INCOME GENERATOR**

While these statements may contain a small degree of substance – they will almost certainly be unsustainable and erratic. My point is that these are not good reasons for the stakeholders in Karoo development to invest in film activity. I believe there are better ones.

The Karoo is a fantastic place to make films: hospitable people, glorious weather, and spectacular landscape. Cape Town, however, is a successful film destination for different reasons (yes, despite its weather and the people;-) This is because it can offer sophisticated infrastructure, experienced technicians and varied and adaptable locations. These services are sustained by co-existent business and volume of activity. Film productions will stay as close as they can to this kind of expertise and efficiency. They will only venture to exotic locations when a particular theme or story unavoidably dictates.. not as a result of reading a brochure.

Two recent examples are the films 'Master Harold and the Boys' and 'Nothing But The Truth'. The soul and the setting of both these stories is Port Elizabeth..

but after a long look at the logistics, and therefore the cost, they were shot in Cape Town and Durban respectively. The Eastern Cape has made repeatedly fruitless attempts to run a film office.

So why support film production?

Film activity should not be seen in isolation, but as a link in an interdependent chain of social, cultural, and economic activities. Feature films, for instance, feed off literary, musical and dramatic production. If we develop the culture of this region holistically: its fantastic stories, unique identity and creative expression.. then the consequent films will have to follow, as where else could you make a film that is set in the Karoo?

But there are still other, bigger values.

I recall one day, shortly after moving to a small Karoo village, that I asked a young man why he did not plan to continue the subsistence garden that had been managed by his late father. His reply was that the modest income would not even be sufficient to pay for his mobile phone contract. This was before a cellphone signal was even available in the village! That conversation kept me very aware of the dynamic inevitability of change and aspiration.

For some time, I have been developing a feature film adaptation of an Athol Fugard play. 'Valley Song' is a story about change: about old versus new; about tomorrow versus yesterday. It is a story about an old man (very much like the gardener I have mentioned) and his granddaughter, Veronica Jonkers. Veronica is a naturally talented singer, who dreams of leaving her remote Karoo village for a life of success and stardom.. and this sets the pivotal tension around which the rest of the story revolves.

Theatre and film are surprisingly different media. In theatre, we accept not only a fabricated backdrop, but also a structure and dialogue that is, in fact, quite far from reality. Film, on the other hand, demands veracity and a believable locality. Within these constraints, however, lies a great deal of creative freedom – and the adaptation that I am developing places much more emphasis on Veronica's talent and a remarkable output of original music.. not just to produce a popular film, but to foreground the social tensions around creativity and tradition.

It is possible to make a successful film by simply tapping into our set notions of Karoo culture - but I have begun to see this as dismissing an invaluable opportunity. An original plan to travel the region searching for music and talent for the film has now developed into a standalone project that aspires to listen to, in particular, the voice of the young people of the Karoo.

The objective is now not only to record but to create an opportunity for the Karoo to see and to hear itself.. hopefully through a process of self-documentation and exhibition. In order for Karoo society to flourish, sustainably, we need to encourage self-awareness, individuality and pride. In the case of my project, the last thing we need, in fact, is a 'Karoo Idols'.. encouraging clones of Celine Dion. What we need is to find (and get to know) the real Veronica Jonkers.

And so, on a broader scale..

Who do you think of when I say Nieu-Bethesda.. or Groot Marico.. or, for that matter red velskoen? These are individuals who define our culture through the power of their creativity. The resonance of these icons indicates that culture is not a nicety, it is a bedrock from which socio-economic activity grows. (Nieu-Bethesda receives about fifteen times its own population in visitors annually).

But, significantly, these are also people who were not afraid to bare their souls, to acknowledge difference and to examine weakness and pain. And so we must be very wary of commodifying culture. It doesn't keep like heritage. In the context of tourism, we should build a demand to experience this country based on the appeal of a living culture.. warts and all.

This the kind of thing that film can do.

(We have only to consider the effects of films like Crocodile Dundee and No1 Ladies Detective Agency).

And so, having said that it is pointless to artificially construct a film industry, one can see the socio-economic benefits of film from a multi-dimensional perspective. The same reasoning should inspire support from government, from the provinces, and from private enterprise for all activities that expose, preserve and nurture the heritage and culture of the Karoo.

While 2010 is an important event.. the deepest and most sustainable demand for tourism in the Karoo will be built by just going about our own business.

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