

Film as Africa's key economic driver for 2016

 By Leigh Andrews

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Triggerfish Animation Studios walked away from the Premier's Entrepreneurship Recognition Awards (PERA) as Overall Winner, along with the titles of Business of the Year and Business with Global Reach. CEO Stuart Forrest explains how film is transforming business on the continent.



Stuart Forrest

Triggerfish was congratulated by Western Cape premier Helen Zille for its wins at PERA, particularly for its ability to create jobs, grow turnover and make a major impact on economic growth in the province.

This comes on the heels of Triggerfish's Sanlam/Business Partners Innovator of the Year Award win in 2012, proving that South African films and TV series can travel globally and deliver a significant return on investment.

Little wonder with their two feature films *Adventures in Zambezia* and *Khumba* featuring the vocal talents of Samuel L Jackson and Liam Neeson, amongst others. The animation company has definitely proven it's no small fry. Now in its 20th year, Triggerfish work appears in 27 languages and licensed in over 150 countries, generating over R1bn at box offices and home entertainment across the world.

Forrest elaborates on the importance of good news stories and their uplifting impact for the continent as a whole...

1. Share your business highlights from the past 20 years.

Forrest: Our first big breakthrough was when we were awarded 40 minutes of animation for *Takalani Sesame*, which we had to subcontract out to 10 companies. At the time it was a huge commission, and from there we went on to create animation for *Sesame Street* US and *Sesame Street* international.

Later, we shifted from a stop-frame animation company to a computer-generated animation company, which opened a lot of doors to do short films, of which we've done many.

Adventures in Zambezia was a huge milestone as it was the first time we were doing non-commissioned work, meaning that we conceived and created the film ourselves without a client. We did it again on *Khumba*, and have continued to develop our own scripts through our internal development department and the Story Lab.

Being awarded the commission of *Stick Man* was a huge accomplishment and a testimony to the growth of the studio. It's a beautiful 26-minute short film based on a children's book by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler, produced by London-based Magic Light Pictures. This was broadcast on BBC1 on Christmas Day and got rave reviews, with [more viewers than the queen](#) on the day!



A scene from *Stick Man*

On the back of that, we've also been awarded the *Revolting Rhymes* collaboration, which involves 2 x 26-minute shorts of Roald Dahl's classic, set to be broadcast over Christmas 2016 on BBC.

We've been running The Triggerfish Story Lab, a continent-wide search for writing talent with the dti and Disney, which has been extremely successful with nearly 1,400 applicants from 30 African countries. Finding writers with a strong voice and audience empathy is the lifeblood of our development department, and this initiative has given us a deep pool of creative talent to find fresh material to build our film slate on.

We're also developing a new film titled *Seal Team*, which we are currently shopping in the US. Watch this space!

2. How does a local business like yours successfully operate across the continent and indeed the world?

Forrest: We have three pillars of excellence that we've built the company around - creative, technical and partnership. The

partnership excellence is what's enabled us to operate around the world. We have 60 distributors over our two films, we have sales agents based out of Beverly Hills who have been very good for us, and we have nurtured high quality relationships from London to Hollywood - including our relationship with Disney and super agency William Morris Endeavor. Partnering with the best in the business holds us to a high standard and constantly improves us, as well as giving us access to deeply established networks and their own relationships.

3. What's the impact of your PERA wins for Triggerfish?

Forrest: These kinds of awards are always great for company morale. There's a huge team of artists, technicians and production support people who pour their lives into the work we do. It's great that the highest level of local government has recognised that their passion and hard work has actually contributed to something bigger. It's also great to get the publicity, because we're a local company operating on the world stage, but we're better known in some of our foreign territories where we've had hits than we are in our own backyard. It's a good news story that we hope can inspire other people to recognise the wonderful opportunities we have right here in South Africa.

4. Definitely. Explain how film can be a key economic driver in Africa.

Forrest: Film has several ways of being an economic driver. Our first two films, *Adventures in Zambesia* and *Khumba*, have proven that South African films can make a profit and sell worldwide. They were translated into over 27 languages and licensed in over 150 countries, generating gross revenues over R1bn between box office and home entertainment.

The National Film and Video Foundation's 2012 Economic Baseline study valued the South African film industry at R3.5bn, but the study wasn't able to accurately measure income generated after production, so it under-represents the sector's potential value. Film also has an economic multiplier effect of 2.81, so for every one rand spent in the film industry, an additional R1.89 is generated in the industries that service the sector.

Film is labour intensive so it employs a lot of people. In animation especially, there are many different areas of expertise, it's a great way for us to capitalise on our amazing creative and technical talent.

Film storytelling also has a cultural benefit and assists in promoting social cohesion. Every culture has its stories, and we need to be able to tell those stories. When I say culture, I mean South African culture in its broadest sense, which I think in many ways as a nation we're still trying to define.

Finally, there's room in the world entertainment industry to hear a voice from other parts of the world. None of the emerging market territories have been very successful at producing global entertainment, and I think we're uniquely positioned to do this. The PR benefit is that people around the world can see that South Africa has highly capable talent, and this can lead to more consideration around investment, tourism and trade. There's a saying that 'trade follows film' - part of why the US supported Hollywood was because they understood this, that if they could export their culture, it would be easier to then export their other products.

5. Looking to the future then, give us a sneak peek on your plans for the year ahead.

Forrest: As it's our 20th anniversary, we've been giving careful thought to how we position Triggerfish for the next 20 years, and what we need to put in place to ensure we continue to attract the best and brightest talent to work with us. Our entire business is based on access to talent, so we're improving this all the time.

Seems we're set to hear big things from Triggerfish in the coming months. Watch the video embedded below for more on the Triggerfish success story:

For more on Triggerfish, [click here](#) and visit their [Twitter feed](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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