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# Neal McKenna

[nealmckenna@nealmckenna.co.za](mailto:nealmckenna@nealmckenna.co.za)

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## Stay Tuned!

BY: Neal McKenna

Lights! Camera! Action! No doubt about it, there's no biz like showbiz – the glitz, the glamour, the roar of the greasepaint; the smell of the crowd. And, all those beautiful people sweeping across the red carpet at gala events; they're definitely the stuff dreams and fantasies are made of. However, the glitterati represent the mere tip of the TV/film production iceberg. Those celebrities we love to ogle, wherever we may happen upon them, are the end result of a great deal of hard work accomplished by dozens of other people you'll never see or hear about. Behind-the-scenes

workers include gaffers, set builders, production assistants and so on. Next, moving on up in the pecking order, are publicists, props people, costumers, set designers, writers, producers and directors.

Television, just like the movies, is a business – in reality, an assembly line factory. Tucked away in Johannesburg's Highlands North suburb, the largest of **Sasani Studios** two lots, is home to **Franz Marx Film Productions**, makers of *Egoli*. Despite its invisibility, Sasani is South Africa's largest independent provider of studios and other operating facilities to the television and film industry. And, like any other factory, the objective



**Hannes van Wyk, who plays Krynauw du Buisson, Egoli's resident bad boy.**

here is to produce the best product possible at the least amount of time and expense. With Egoli, the powers-that-be have fine-tuned the process with clockwork precision. "Most things get done very quickly here," says publicist, **Jared Stokes**. "About one hundred and forty people work on this production alone, and though this sounds like a cliché, we really are one big, happy family."

Egoli falls into the category of *daytime drama* – that's the *soaps* to you and me. Therefore, week in and week out, scripted angst and turmoil abound on the sound stages. However, outside on the studio lot, the atmosphere is almost tranquil. Workers seem relaxed as they go about their duties but they still have time to chat, take breaks, or

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direct the unfamiliar to Block C4, where the Egoli offices are located. The outdoor commissary is a shaded meeting place where producers or other executives discuss work over lattes and actors study their lines.

Here is where I waited to be admitted into the inner sanctum of the writing department, which lies within the aforementioned Block C4. Shortly thereafter, following a trek through narrow and twisting corridors, I was introduced to Head Writer, **Frans Kalp**. This is the man who lays awake nights plotting the misadventures and horrible events that happen to all Egoli characters.

In spite of this being true, he insists his job isn't very glamorous. "The only time it gets a bit exciting for me," he laughs, "is when we get calls from views who don't like where we are taking their favourite characters." It seems Kalp got into the top writer's chair via the back door. "I started out as an actor," he confesses. "Then later, I wrote a couple of stage plays. And, this is when I discovered I had a skill for character development and writing dialogue. So I packed in the acting and took up writing. I believe writing has very much to do with observation. I watch people and take note of their emotions. Then, I incorporate what they do into my characters."

Presently, Kalp works with a team of ten – one assistant writer, one "story liner" six freelance writers, a sub-editor and a typist. "A lot of viewers think the script is written by just one person, but of course, that isn't the case. It's simply too much work. We each take the bits we have written and then panel-beat them into a single progression. We try to have three story lines happening at all times," he explains. "A is the main story. B is a secondary plot line. And C is usually the introduction of a new story. We also introduce

additional plot lines, comedy threads but they're not usually very important to the overall plot. But we often do shift story lines so that the B story becomes more prominent and takes over the lead from A. That keeps the characters rotating through the plot."

Wednesday is brainstorming day. The writers get together and play a game of 'what if.' "We toss out ideas and see where they take us. On Thursdays, we break down our new ideas into scenes. On Friday, we plot all the scenes onto a grid to establish which characters will be in those scenes. On the following Monday, each writer is assigned an entire episode to write."

Therefore, each writer has to know where all the characters are coming from and – knowing their personas – what they would say and do in any given situation. Better yet, their new script has to seamlessly flow from the previous writer's script and into the ensuing one. Seems like writing a soap script is fully-fledged committee work! And by the end of the work day on Tuesday, completed scripts are turned in for the head writer to approve. So in a nutshell, a week's worth of episodes are generated every week. And within four weeks, those scenes are being shot on a soundstage. No kidding! This does seem to be factory work!

Another important character in any drama is the set. Without the appropriate backdrop, all the Egoli characters would simply be lost in space. So by combining ingenuity, imagination and carpentry skills, Set Designer **Willie Coetzee** gives the drama's ersatz beings a place to live. However, unlike the typical hammer and nails guy, he has a background in architecture. "You have to know what will work and what won't. Sets not only have to look pretty,"

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he explains, “they also must have functionality and be strong enough to withstand a lot of use.” Tricks of the trade often include not using actual building materials but alternatives that look like the real thing.

For example, marble tiles are expensive and heavy. Willie’s art department – with spray guns and rollers – paint what looks like real marble on light fibreboard. And, I’m here to tell you, it looks amazing – even up close! In the course of the production year, Egoli scripts call for more than 85 indoor sets. “Naturally, not all of them are in use all of the time,” says Coetzee. “Some sets, like restaurants, holiday homes or the Cresta set, are only used once in a while. When they are not needed, we pull them apart and put them into storage.” Here’s an example. Krynauw du Buisson’s sprawling penthouse takes the space of three regular sets. However, at the moment, it is not necessary for the shoot schedule, so it has been dismantled like a giant tinker toy.

As Head of Props and Set Dressing, **Inamarie Swanepoel** has a similar function as the set designer. She is responsible for every item placed on the set – from the furniture to a highball glass to a fake bomb. A prop is defined as anything and everything an actor touches or handles. “Every set is unique and has a life of its own,” she explains. “In Egoli, at the Edwards’ house, everything, including the food, has to be elaborate and look expensive. But in the Naude’s boarding house, everything needs to look basic – like there are room renters living there.”

And, every week, Swanepoel must meticulously go through each script and make lists of what will be required for that up-coming shoot. Once this is

done, she must locate each item and make sure it is in its proper place on the set prior to taping. Always, sets have to look real – not just their best. “For the last seven years,” she says, “I have been responsible for the “look” of Egoli.

“...Everything in this job is about detail,” she continues. “We are not allowed to show any brand if it is not sponsored. For example, tinned food not available from our sponsors has to have a fictitious label, which is created by our props department. The same goes for books and CD covers. They are faked because of copyright laws. However, it is also my responsibility to ensure that our sponsors’ products do get seen on the show.”

**Anet Stoller** also has an exacting job. Being Wardrobe Mistress is not all about shopping sprees at the mall. “For clothes to work on camera,” she says, “there are rules that have to be abided by. Like everyone else in production, I have to break down scripts, to know what kind of clothing is needed in the storyline. Then, I buy or make clothing to fit the actors, but more importantly, it is my responsibility that the styles they wear suit them.” Beyond this, Stoller is responsible for upkeep. “Yes, I’m also in charge of running the laundry department and operating our design & alteration room, as well as supervising the standby crew.”

When it comes to really special occasions like storyline weddings, Stoller puts her design skills to good use. “I have designed most of the wedding dresses on the show in the last three years. Such costumes are constructed to fit the individual actors to their specific measurements.” But even with off-the-rack wardrobe, there is often work to be done. “Clothes bought ‘off the peg’ tend not fit

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as well as made to order costumes – and so, they have to be altered too.”

In the course of a regular work week, the Egoli crew shoots between eighty and one hundred scenes. Each scene has an average of two to five people and every last actor of needs to be clothed. “With overlapping costumes,” says Stoller, “we can easily average three hundred outfits a week! Having everything together and ready when it is needed – that's a real challenge, but I love it!”

**Jared Stokes** is one of the very youngest and newest members of the Egoli crew. At age 24, he is at the beginning of his TV/film career. “Being the publicist for a show like Egoli is such a good start for me.” His grin is from ear to ear. “With this job, I'm using both my marketing education as well as my film school education. ...A publicist's job is pretty straightforward,” he admits. “I have to make sure the media has lots of information about the show. The thing is coordinating it all! It's such a complex job. If I set something up for an actor, like a magazine photo shoot, I have to make sure it doesn't conflict with the shooting schedule or a hundred other things. Sometimes, it takes a full day to set up one appointment for just a single person. And many times, because things change so rapidly here, even a simple press release can take weeks to produce a final draft. Everything here involves incredible logistics!” But does he also love his job? You bet he does!

Of course, it wouldn't be right to do an article about Egoli and not talk to any of the actors. One of several introduced to me was **Hannes van Wyk**, who plays **Krynauw du Buisson**, the show's resident bad boy. Unlike his pent-up alter ego, van Wyk is an affable guy who is quick to smile and tell entertaining

stories. Van Wyk has been an actor for 16 years and an Egoli cast member for almost half that time. As a matter of fact, he is in the seventh year of a five week gig! “When I came to Egoli, it was intended to be for a very short time,” he relates. “At the beginning, Krynauw was a minor character. I don't think anybody expected a gay character to take root, but here he is – seven years later, rich and powerful – and the villain!”

“What I most like about Krynauw is how he is written,” says van Wyk. “He's not only evil. He is a mix of both good and bad, like a real person. I admit he has an enormous agenda, but he doesn't see himself as a bad person. A character like this is a treat for an actor because the audience doesn't know where to place him. He is a moving target. Sometimes they hate him and then they're feeling sorry for him, even if they don't know why. – Krynauw is very complex. We're not even sure he's entirely gay anymore,” van Wyk laughs. “He's changing. He's sleeping with guys. He's sleeping with girls. He's sleeping with just about anything that moves – all in the name of his master plan and who catches his fancy.”

Of course, occasionally, the line between drama and reality does blur. Some people actually believe Krynauw du Buisson and Hannes van Wyk are one and the same. “Not long ago, I had a rather unfortunate incident happen at a petrol station,” says van Wyk. “A fan, if I can call her that, was very nasty and shouted at me. Then she threw coffee on me; all because she didn't like the person Krynauw had become. And another time, not long ago at the airport, I got to the check-in counter and the attendant just looked at me and stopped cold. Then she said: 'No, I don't want to help you! – Next!’”

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“That means Krynauw is very real to these people but I must say, most viewers know the difference.” At this point, he becomes more philosophical. “I suppose it means every one of us on Egoli are doing our jobs well. But at the end of the day, I want everyone to know I haven't become my character. When I go home, I still am Hannes, but I do love playing Krynauw. That's why I am still here and not working in Cape Town.”

Van Wyk explains that even though seven years have transpired, his home and his life remain in Cape Town. He merely works in Johannesburg – which amounts to a lot of time in the air, commuting. Speaking of commuting, his workday in Jo'burg begins early. “I try to beat the morning traffic,” he says, “so I'm usually at the studio by 7:00. I have breakfast and study my lines for the day's shoots. Then around 10:00, we normally start rehearsals. Makeup and costumes happen sometime after 11:00 and shooting goes on until 4:00. – On a busy days, maybe until 7:00 p.m. or later. It's a demanding life but it's my life.”

If he hadn't become an actor, van Wyk admits he might have gone into public relations. “to tell the truth, I am doing some PR at the moment and I enjoy it very much. Then again, I just as easily could have become a lawyer or a director or a writer. Well actually, I **am** a writer. – I write for several

magazines including the Gay Pages.” And do Gay Pages readers ever connect the dots and realise that the Hannes van Wyk who writes for this magazine is the same guy who plays Krynauw on Egoli? “Oh yes,” he grins, “I have received some very complimentary e-mails from Egoli viewers who are also Gay Pages readers.”

Just to keep variety in his life and ready cash flowing in from another source, van Wyk teamed up with **Jenny Sprawson**, head of make-up and hair at Egoli. Together, about two and a half years ago, they created **Discover the Star in You**. This is a consultancy which organises events for women's days, private functions and corporate events. Van Wyk does motivational speaker duties on a variety of topics while Sprawson performs skillful makeovers. In all, it is a fast three hours of educational fun.

So, that's a day in the life of Tinseltown, Jozi style. But let's not stray too far from the Egoli story line. Will Krynauw du Buisson ever find true happiness again? Will he win the man he loves back from that haughty vixen, Jane? Will all the dismantled pieces of his sprawling penthouse go back together without a hitch? Will the writers eventually run out of plot twists? Will any of these questions ever be answered? ...Stay tuned!