

Die Ontwaking awakens South African filmmaking

 By [Daniel Dercksen](#)

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Daniel Dercksen shares a few thoughts with Die Ontwaking producer, writer and director Johnny Breedt.

Die Ontwaking (The Awakening) is a grisly, action-packed thriller that investigates the mind and motivation of an acutely intelligent serial killer, and marks the directorial debut of acclaimed production designer Johnny Breedt (Paljas, Hotel Rwanda, A Long Walk to Freedom).

Johnny designed the bio-pic Mandela: The Long Walk To Freedom and was awarded the SAFTA for Best Production Design.

At Tshwane University in Pretoria, Johnny Breedt completed a four-year course in Theatre & Stage Design and with distinction (N Dip Tech). Thereafter, he held various positions within the art department in both local and international films, such as Anna and the King (20th Century Fox) and The Ghost and the Darkness (Paramount Pictures), I Dreamed of Africa (Sony Columbia), The Grey Zone (Killer Films) and Chronicle (20th Century Fox), mostly as art director.

His debut as production designer was a local film, A Woman of Color, followed by the Art Film Paljas, for which he received an MNet All-Africa Award nomination for Best Art Direction. Paljas, directed by Katinka Heyns, was the first South African film entered into the Best Foreign Film category for an Academy Award.

Hailed as a game changer for South African film, Die Ontwaking is based on the first book of the Abel trilogy, Abel se Ontwaking (translated into English as The Skin Collector), by well-known crime writer Chris Karsten.



■ ***Well done! A film that really hits home and allows us to reconnect with the darkness that lurks in society. Your views on this?***

I learned from Anthony Minghella that making films that either were about - or had elements of - the darker side of life, are way more interesting than most. He always chose this as an essential key to the projects that he took on and although he never made that many films, most were brilliant.

■ ***What inspired you to write the screenplay, produce the film and then sit in the director's chair?***

I really wanted to be challenged as a filmmaker and wanted to do the same with my audience, take them to a place where they do not necessarily want to go. Honestly, I did not think my first film as director would be a psycho thriller, but I did know that I was not going to make what everyone else was doing. Producing the film is an entity on its own, especially raising the funds and then delivering the film within that budget. I always wanted to be a director, way before I ended up designing films, so the transition was easy for me. I was also fortunate to work alongside directors like Phillip Noyce, Carrol Ballard, Terry George and Anthony Minghella, so I really learned from some of the best.

■ ***Was it an easy story to write?***

No. At first I thought that adapting a book would be easier than starting with an original screenplay, but boy was I wrong. I have written a number of original scripts and they seemed easier as I was the sole creator of the story and the characters. It was difficult to take someone else's story and characters and try to make them my own. The way I got around it was that I eliminated a lot of the back-story details that were in the book. These played off mostly during the Boer War and I figured that if a younger audience was going to be attracted to the story, then I should lose the Boer War story. I also changed some of the characters and added in some of my own ideas, and it then started taking the shape that I was after. Chris Karsten wrote a beautiful, almost poetic, novel and I butchered it to make it work cinematically, but still kept the original concept intact where possible. Chris was very impressed with the final outcome of the film.



Johnny Breedt

■ ***Tell me about your cast and how they influenced the film from page to screen.***

I had a wonderful mixture of both experienced cast and some new actors. Gys definitely brought Abel's character to life and he took a different direction than what I had originally imagined. At first I was a little apprehensive about that, but I soon realised that he was going to give me a character that people would be expecting for a film of this genre. Personally, I think this role was made for Gys and it is one of his best by far. Paul Eilers did the same with his character, as did Gerard Rudolf and Morne Visser. The experience that they brought to the show was incredible and I could see how the younger actors were feeding off them during filming. We discovered some great new talent as well, including Armand Aucamp who is a star now in his own right, Juanita de Villiers who brilliantly plays the lead detective Ella Neser, Morne Visser who plays the suave David Eigelaar, and Natasha Dreyer, who plays one of the killer's victims. The cast really brought interesting dynamics to the project.

■ ***Did you set out to write and direct the film?***

Yes. I love writing and I love directing. Sure, I would also direct other people's scripts, but feel closer to the process this way.

■ ***Writing and directing a story you feel passionate about is ideal for any storyteller. What are your views on this?***

If you don't have passion or you don't follow that passion, you die. I follow this mantra in life, not only in writing and directing, but in everything I tackle.

■ ***Do you find that your celebrated career as a production designer has helped you in writing the screenplay?***

Yes, of course. I have worked on over 60 productions and have read hundreds of screenplays in the process. Production design is about creating incredible images that tell a story and we often forget that that is what a film is - moving images. Although good directors don't have to have been production designers, they are still involved in a large way, in the overall look of the film. They achieve this together with the cinematographer and production designer. In my case, I am able to use my design skills to my advantage, but what I will say, one can never be both on a film. I distance myself more from the design job on *Die Ontwaking* and vice versa when I work as production designer on other projects.

■ ***Have you always wanted to be a filmmaker and where did it start for you? When was that first moment that you knew you wanted to be a storyteller and story maker?***

I knew at a very early age that I wanted to do this as a career. At first my father was not keen and, of course, today he is my biggest fan. I used to talk a lot of shit when I was younger and people were always amazed by what came out of my mouth - and that has never changed. Oddly, I would describe myself an introvert who has the ability to bullshit in a way that people listen.

■ ***What excites and motivates you as a filmmaker?***

I like stuff that is realistic and I like to take risks - that really motivates me. I really love taking a script from concept to the end product, as designer or as director. Writing is where it all starts, of course - without the script we have nothing.

■ ***How do you see the current state of the local film industry?***

I am excited to see new genres slowly creeping in and some great talent emerging. What we have to be careful of is making crap, just because we can. Audiences are not as stupid as many distributors would like to think and they will start to demand great content. Of course there will always be a place for romantic comedies, but if we want to be more than just a nation that has talent, and rather be known as a nation that makes its own great films, we will have to get our audiences to appreciate local cinema more. Why will Afrikaners watch a horror film in English, but not in Afrikaans? That's why I don't specifically make Afrikaans films - I make South African films that hopefully can stand their own ground internationally - they just happen to be in Afrikaans.

■ ***What advice do you have for writers who want to break into the industry?***

Never give up, have more than one script, and don't be afraid to rewrite!

■ ***What do you hope audiences will take home from watching *Die Ontwaking*?***

I really hope that people still talk about the film and its characters a day or two after watching it. Although the film is graphic and dark, it is still just a film and I can only hope that people will enjoy it.

■ ***Tell me about your future plans.***

I am currently busy writing three scripts: *The Border*, which is set during the Angolan bush war (also an adaptation), *Toorberg* (adaptation), and a personal story entitled *Hotel Boys*, which depicts the life and struggle of two teenage boys growing up in one-star hotels in apartheid South Africa.

■ ***How difficult is it to produce a film independently in South Africa and then send it out into the world?***

It is extremely difficult. It took me two years to get my film screened in my own country and we have only recently managed

to get a foreign sales agent on board. We just never gave up trying and now the rewards are great. When my films go to the cinemas on 26 February, I will truly feel like I have moved up into the position of director. I was extremely fortunate that I had Charon Landman, a local businesswoman as the benefactor of my film. If it were not for her financial role as executive producer, together with the DTI, it would not have been possible.

Read more about Die Ontwaking and other new releases at www.writingstudio.co.za

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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