

Johnny Breedt talks 'Sergio' on Netflix, Covid-19's effects on film industry

By  Daniel Dercksen

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Production designer and filmmaker Johnny Breedt talks about *Sergio* and how the coronavirus pandemic has severely impacted the entertainment industry.

Daniel Dercksen chats with internationally-renowned production designer Johnny Breedt about the release of new film *Sergio* on Netflix and how the coronavirus pandemic has severely impacted on the entertainment industry.



Johnny Breedt

Having worked as the visual architect on over 50 productions internationally – and designed at least 25 of those – Breedt won the Safta award for *Mandela – Long Walk To Freedom*; a Peabody award collectively for *The Number One Ladies Detective Agency* series; and his film *Die Ontwaking*, which he wrote and directed, is one of the favourite films on Showmax.

With the release of *Sergio* on Netflix during the coronavirus pandemic, Breedt celebrated its debut with his crew via the internet.

When I interviewed Breedt during the release of *Die Ontwaking* and was invited to do a workshop for screenwriters at Breedt's Indie Karoo Festival in Prince Albert, I never dreamed that we would end up as neighbours in the heart of the Karoo, chatting over the fence during a pandemic lockdown.



Die Ontwaking awakens South African filmmaking

Daniel Dercksen 26 Feb 2016



■ ***The coronavirus pandemic has severely impacted on the entertainment industry, particularly film?***

I think it will hit the industry hard. There is even the potential that we could lose one or two of the big studios. I also think that the way we make films will now be compromised and we will have to adapt to newer and stricter regulations. On the upside, there will be a huge gap in the market for content, so I guess that Hollywood will find itself in a major traffic jam of productions, once the restrictions are lifted. You must understand that many TV shows were mid-season when this virus came about and so filming of those shows was halted. These will have to be completed before they can air and the problem is that studio space is going to be limited as other productions have already booked these studios in LA, well in advance. Either way, things will be different, but I still believe there will be work, especially for those that we're able to hang in there and wait for a return to full production. Maybe it's a good thing – time will tell.

■ ***Let's talk about Sergio, based on Brazilian United Nations diplomat Sérgio Vieira de Mello, who worked for more than 34 years in several UN humanitarian and political programmes. What inspired you to work on the film?***

The script. I really did not know much about the story beforehand, but when I read the script, I knew that I wanted to do this film. I guess the next step was to watch Greg Barker's documentary with the same title. I was so impressed by the actions of Sergio Viera de Mello, who clearly made such a difference to so many people's lives, but never got or wanted much credit for it.

■ ***How do you as a designer immerse yourself into the world of Brazilian politics and global affairs?***

Sergio was instrumental in the success of several historical events. Even though he was working for the UN, he often broke protocol in order to do his job properly. This was the case when he took it upon himself to negotiate with the Khmer Rouge about the repatriation of thousands of Cambodian refugees back to their motherland. He also became the viceroy of East Timor and successfully set up an interim government, before the first democratic elections were held in that country. It was through this success that Kofi Annan asked him to set up an interim government in Iraq in 2003.

■ ***Was Sergio a difficult project to work on? Tell me about the obstacles you encountered?***

The film did have many challenges and the biggest one was the fact that we filmed in three different countries, with three different film crews and three different time zones. We started filming in Brazil, followed by Jordan and finally in Thailand. Because of the time differences, I ended up working virtually seven days a week and very long hours in order to get all the necessary information to my crew. Initially, I thought the language barrier would also play a part but, honestly, without sounding too clichéd, the crew all spoke one language, the language of film.



Cast and crew of Sergio

■ Is it difficult being the visual architect of a film based on fact?

A production designer is responsible for the entire 'look' of the film and so yes, it is often complex. One must also note that although this is a very creative position, it also has many other aspects that come with the job description, including logistics, management and control of a budget. Of course, no film is the same and so too the levels of requirements. To give you an example, *Mandela – Long Walk to Freedom* was an extremely complex film to design as it covered 10 decades of Madiba's life. The fortunate thing was that I was able to be involved in that project on and off for a period of about 15 years. That on its own was a huge plus as there was more than enough time to research the project properly. *Sergio*, on the other hand, was a relatively low budget film, also about a real-life character, spanning over a shorter period, but still complex to design. The period for research was limited to the seven weeks of pre-production allocated, so whilst I was still researching the various periods, I was already designing the film. A third of this film plays off in a collapsed building after a terror attack of the UN compound in Iraq. I had to engineer this collapsed shaft set in a way that was not only safe for the crew and cast to work in, but still be as realistic as possible visually. The shaft had to be designed in a way that was conducive to the cinematography, providing that department with external camera platforms, lighting positions and portals to shoot through. Many of the scenes required various special effects to take place in the shaft during the filming process, including, smoke, electrical sparks, fire and dripping water. My art director Fernando Carrion best described the set as a 20m high sculpture where every piece of concrete or rubble had to be carefully thought out and placed in the correct position.

■ Most of the films you work on have a political agenda. Is this a genre that interests you?

I wouldn't say that. Most of the films I've done have had a political agenda, but a fair amount has. After *Hotel Rwanda*, I think that these types of projects automatically found their way towards me. Sure, I am probably more attracted to real stories and/or political dramas, but after the success of *Hotel Rwanda*, I was offered similar genre films like *Catch a Fire*, *Mandela – Long Walk to Freedom*, *Eye in the Sky* and *Sergio*. I am very proud of the other genre films that I had the privilege of designing. But, yes, political dramas have been very good for my career.

■ You have also been successful in the horror genre, particularly *Last House on the Left*?

The thing about horror films is that they are a lot of fun to make. I have done a number of horror films, of which *Last House on the Left* was probably the most successful. I was offered a lot of horror films after that, but I was afraid of being pigeonholed into that genre. I also ventured into sci-fi, like *Replicas*, but soon learned that this genre was probably not my strongest, especially when there are not enough funds to achieve the desired effect.

■ ***How much freedom do you have as the production designer to create a fictional reality?***

We have a lot of freedom but remember that the director has the final say and contributes to the look in a big way. Ultimately, it is their film and we get to help them achieve the final vision. Directors are all different, but they do rely heavily on the production designer and cinematographer to achieve this vision.

■ ***How different is it working as a production designer in the US than in South Africa?***

Very different. The craft remains the same, but in the US we have union restrictions that dictate a lot of what can or can't be achieved. Elsewhere, there could be fewer restrictions, but what I learned in the US is that people are real specialists in their respective fields. In South Africa, the crew often do more than one job and, sadly, that means that people do not stay around long enough in a position to become great in that specific department. Ultimately, the way to earn more money here is to become an art director or a production designer. Artists in the props and set decoration department often climb the ladder fast and end up designing films. Some may be great at it but, often, they are simply not designers, whereas they were probably great prop masters or set decorators prior to that. This does not happen in the US and it is not uncommon to see older more experienced artists in the industry.



Redeeming Love

■ ***Tell me about being the production designer on Redeeming Love – which you recently completed in Cape Town.***

Based on a famous Christian book by Francine Rivers, the film plays off during the 1850 gold rush in California and was shot entirely in Cape Town. This in its own was challenging, as we had to build an entire western town – with practical interiors for saloons, churches, brothels and stores. The film is due for release in late 2020 or perhaps even later now due to the coronavirus. This was a very rewarding personal experience and I look forward to seeing the final film.

■ ***Where did it all start for you, that moment you knew you wanted to be a filmmaker?***

When I was six years old, I watched a film about a giant robot in our school hall and I was hooked. As a career choice, I knew in high school that I was going to be in the entertainment industry, but I would never have imagined that I would work all over the globe, working with an incredible cast and crew.

■ ***What do you enjoy about being a production designer?***

Where else can you get to create something from paper to the final film? We get to travel to exotic places, experience things that one could only dream of, meet famous people and, ultimately, call it a job for which we get paid. What a privilege and an honour.

■ ***How much has the South African film industry changed since you worked on films like Paljas?***

Oh, heaps! South Africa has grown up as far as film-making nation goes. This country offers some of the best locations, the best equipment and best crews in the international film industry. There is still something magical about working on those

small intimate films like *Paljas* but, sadly, the industry is so economically driven, so that calibre of the local film is few and far between. There are great local filmmakers here, but they don't often have the choice of making the type of films they really want to make.

■ ***How difficult is it to balance your career and personal life – living in the rural Prince Albert – and working in different countries?***

I have two personas, namely a work persona and then a home persona. They are two very different worlds and as much as I like making films, I also like taking a break from it. Often that would mean just chilling in the Karoo town of Prince Albert, or hanging out with my wife Yvette in our small apartment in Los Angeles, shopping, indulging in book stores and chomping on In-N-Out burgers. It is good to have a balance but film-making is like an addiction. When you're in it, it can be crazy and stressful and at times you may say that you want out. However, a few days after finishing a film, you start inquiring about the next project. Weird but, yes, it is true.

Sergio is now available for streaming on Netflix South Africa

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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