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Amazing animation for Africa's children

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ONCE upon a time story- telling was the business of our grandmothers. Now it is the business of Anamazing Workshop.

Anamazing tells African stories with African themes by Africans, through animation.

The company was established eight years ago by Isabelle Rorke, 33, and Dumini Gumbi, 35, who realised that African stories were being told from outside the continent and by non-Africans.

They have made it their mission to become the leading creators of African animation content that will have cross-cultural appeal and compete at global standards.

Rorke said: "When we started the company, nobody was doing African animations, so it made us notice the gap in the market and the need for this kind of company. When we started out, we faced two challenges – developing the industry while growing our business.

"But this has also motivated us because there is a need for job creation. Africa has great folk tales to be told."

Anamazing Workshop is 100 percent black-owned, based in Johannesburg with two main product offerings – long-form animation and short-form animation.

It generates revenue from the Animation Production Training Initiative (APTI).

The company has a staff complement of 35 and at least 68 writers, animators, a production manager, an IT manager and directors have also been trained.

Currently, the company has the third largest animation studio in South Africa and in 2007 it generated R8.8million in revenue.

It took R20000 to start the business and the money was sourced from the savings of the two partners.

"This is an expensive business as it costs roughly R30m to make a 75 minute film. Creating these animations is not cheap because you have to build everything from the character to the grass, couch, even the hair of the characters, among other requirements. Everything has to align with the script and be animated as planned.

"It is time consuming, laborious and very costly," explained Rorke.

"The fact that we are pioneers in this industry makes it challenging for us to source funding for our projects."

She added that the industry is viewed to be elitist, making it more difficult to find funding.

Anamazing's most recent projects have been funded and distributed by the SABC. Productions have also been made for TV commercials for advertising agencies. Their clients include the SABC, the South African government and Young & Rubicam advertising agency.



PIONEER: Isabelle Rorke, pictured, and business partner, Dumini Gumbi, spotted a gap in the market and formed Anamazing. Picture: SUPPLIED

After identifying the project, the content with African stories and themes is secured according to the stated regulations. The next step is to develop the content, produce it and then distribute it.

"Currently, our primary market is South Africa but our animated content has garnered international acclaim. This market is estimated to be worth around R200m today. Production capabilities in the country are relatively small and underdeveloped, plagued by skills shortages and inadequate facilities. Unfortunately, local talent is being drawn overseas.

"Most animated content being shown in South Africa is almost entirely imported from abroad, often bearing little relevance to the cultures and daily realities of African children," she said.

Rorke said that the company has moved into TV, mobile phones and cinema and this has been a great success for them.

"At the beginning of this year, Africa had approximately 280 million mobile phone subscribers, many of whom are increasingly downloading content telephonically.

"Moreover, Anamazing can leverage its portfolio to meet this demand: long-form animated content can be spliced into smaller 60-second spots and released periodically."

As the business grows, they have to overcome various obstacles.

"Besides funding, there is a need to change the thought set of African parents and encourage them to send their children to schools where they will learn about African animations.

"We also need transformation of the industry and need to get broadcasters to have a strategy for animation. The SABC is starting to recognise the importance and contribution of this industry and that is why we have partnered with them.

"Another block is the lack of proper regulation since the industry is still new," said Rorke.

"Finding the right talent to use our IT software, people with the kind of creativity that we need, those with project management skills and business skills is also tough sometimes."

Rorke is half-Zulu and half-Irish. She was born in KwaZulu-Natal and attended eight different schools across South Africa's Indian, coloured, black and white communities. This enabled her to interact with diverse cultures.

She studied journalism at Rhodes University and got her first job at Ebony magazine in 1997 before moving to Morning Live.

"I was a journalist at Morning Live and head of the arts, culture, and entertainment for this show. It made me more aware of the absence of South African-based entertainment, particularly among animated content for the younger generation."

Her partner Gumbi, also from KwaZulu-Natal, studied film at Tufts University's School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and later became a curator in South Africa on the International Exchange Film Project.

Anamazing's future plans include reaching a global audience and generating animation talent in the country and in their company.

The company is among 10 finalists for the Legatum Pioneers of Prosperity Awards 2008, where more than 1400 applications from 10 African countries were received. The final awards ceremony will be in Rwanda in mid-November. - By MARYANNE MAINA

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