

S. AFRICA TOONS UP TALENT

By Christopher Vourlias

CAPE TOWN

A high-flying falcon is the star of the latest animated pic to come out of South Africa, and local filmmakers are hoping that the country's emerging toon biz will soar along with him.

Triggerfish Studios' "Adventures of Zambezia" is South Africa's most ambitious animated pic to date: a stereoscopic 3D feature that will be released in more than 50 countries by early 2013, including a Feb. 12 U.S. release via Sony. Produced on a budget of less than \$20 million, it boasts a Hollywood voice cast that includes Samuel L. Jackson, Abigail Breslin, Jeff Goldblum, Leonard Nimoy and Jeremy Suarez.

Since its preem at France's Annecy Animation Festival, "Zambezia" has begun its global rollout in Israel, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and it's taken in some \$4 million at the box office. More important, with the exception of its voice actors and some American seed money, it was funded and produced locally.

"It is a truly South African film," Barwise says.

"Zambezia" comes at a critical time for the local animation biz, which is still struggling to establish itself on the global stage. Despite boasting world-class talent, there is a fear among many that the industry has hit a glass ceiling.

"You've got pockets of expertise and brilliance who aren't able to achieve scale," says Glenn Gillis, managing director of animation studio Sea Monster.

The global financial crunch is partly to blame. Clockwork Zoo, once the largest animation house on the continent, was a casualty of the recession, slowing the industry's momentum at a time when it was starting to take some big steps forward, according to Phil Cunningham of Sunrise Prods. While Clockwork's animators moved to other studios, capacity remains a consistent challenge.

Says Nuno Martins, co-founder of the Animation School, South Africa's leading animation academy, "If we had ... an offer now from a big studio in the U.S. saying, 'We need 200 animators,' we wouldn't be able to do that."

Yet on a smaller scale, South Africa has shown signs in re-



Stereo 3D "Zambezia," financed with South African coin and animated by local artists, hopes to show off local toon talent to the world.

cent years that it can produce content that meets the demanding standards of the international marketplace. Clockwork Zoo produced 13 hours of "Cailou" in 2009 for kids' content giant Cookie Jar, as well as 13 hours of "Florrie's Dragons" (2010), with U.K. studio Wish Films, for Disney.

Gillis says that such co-productions show the industry is carving out a competitive niche alongside more established industries in Canada, New Zealand and Australia, as well as emerging industries in Singapore and Malaysia.

"If you want something done quickly and relatively cheaply ... it's probably not going to come out of South Africa,"

he says, drawing comparisons with the assembly-line content in countries like India and China. "(But) if you want something that has good production values, that offers a predictable working environment," he says, South Africa can deliver. "We take a lot of risk out of the equation. The price you see in South Africa is the price you get."

Developing home-grown

content, though, has proven more challenging. Alongside "Zambezia," another promising property has been Sunrise's original animated series "Jungle Beat," which is being distributed in 170 countries, and recently launched on iTunes in Canada. But most animators agree that the only thing that will transform the industry is a steady pipeline of projects that can employ large numbers of animators at one time.

A successful run by "Zambezia" could be a game-changer, building momentum as Triggerfish moves forward with production on its next pic, "Khumba." If the company can put together a string of successes, it would push South Africa closer to that

elusive goal of building capacity through challenging, large-scale projects — an effect that would hopefully extend beyond Triggerfish to other studios.

It also would draw much-needed investment to a sector that remains largely unknown internationally and unproven at home, after lackluster showings from the country's first two animated features.

"We've got ideas and solu-

tions that we know are competitive with the very best in the world," says Gillis, of Sea Monster. "If we were sitting in Silicon Valley and had access to that kind of cash, we would be able to get momentum. But we've got a regulated business environment (and) risk-averse corporates who are cutting spending, (and) not moving very quickly to embrace change."

Establishing a track record is the first step toward drawing local investors into the fold. Part of the problem, says Gillis, lies with the animators themselves who, he says, have a lack of understanding about the sales and distribution side of the industry. The challenge of selling ideas becomes greater when creators can't show prospective investors how they plan to monetize content, Gillis adds.

Triggerfish's Barwise agrees. The experience of selling "Zambezia," she says, has given the company crucial on-the-job training in sales and distribution.

"Part of our learning process is that your marketing ... is almost as important as the product," she says. The studio has already gotten ahead of the curve with South African distrib Nu Metro on "Khumba,"

producing a fuller package of marketing material for global sales agents, she adds.

That extends to merchandising and product tie-ins, which Triggerfish is banking on getting with "Zambezia." The company has inked product deals with some of the country's largest retailers to create a buzz before the film's Dec. 26 domestic release, with the hopes of building momentum ahead of its U.S. release via Sony Pictures.

Sunrise, meanwhile, has launched a chain of toys and apparel around "Jungle Beat," tackling the difficult but all-important challenge of turning an unknown commodity into an established brand.

For most South African animators, that remains the ultimate goal: creating an environment where original, locally produced content can compete globally alongside Hollywood's "Shreks" and "Madagascars." If Kai the falcon takes flight, others could follow.

"I hope that it's the beginning of lots of bigger projects coming to South Africa," says Barwise, so "that the world ... (will) see what we're able to create, and start putting money into local talent, and into building a more sustainable industry." ■

What: "Adventures of Zambezia" will play in more than 50 countries.

The takeaway: The pic may help push the South African animation industry onto the world stage.