

Q&A with *Raaiselkind* screenwriter Pieter Esterhuizen

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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The powerful South African film *Raaiselkind* explores the unrelenting burden of autism on an average, loving family and shows the disintegration of the family as a result. It drives home the inescapable truth that society can be cruelly indifferent to whatever it perceives to be aberrant.

In the film, a nine-year-old autistic boy is found dead. His mother Ingrid (Diaan Lawrenson), who spent her life caring for him and loved him dearly, is being investigated for murder.

Says director Andre Velts: “*Raaiselkind* is a sensational story that portrays the ruthless cross of autism. In this haunting story, the tragedy of autism and its devastating effect on a family is being exposed. Searingly honest, it brings the inescapable truth that society can be cruelly indifferent to whatever it perceives to be aberrant.”

“There is so much ignorance surrounding subjects such as autism and I believe this story will go some way towards creating awareness of the plight of adults and children afflicted in this way and the difficulties faced by their families. By sharing stories, we start conversations, create awareness and this is a step towards changing attitudes towards people on the spectrum.”

The film is based on the Annelie Botes novel *Raaiselkind*, where the confrontation of dealing with autism within a family is brought to light. Directed by André Velts, from a screenplay by Lizé Vosloo and Pieter Esterhuizen. With Diaan Lawrenson, June van Merch, Deon Lotz, Anrich Herbst, Ian Roelofs (Alexander).

❑ ***Tell me about Raaiselkind what is it about?***

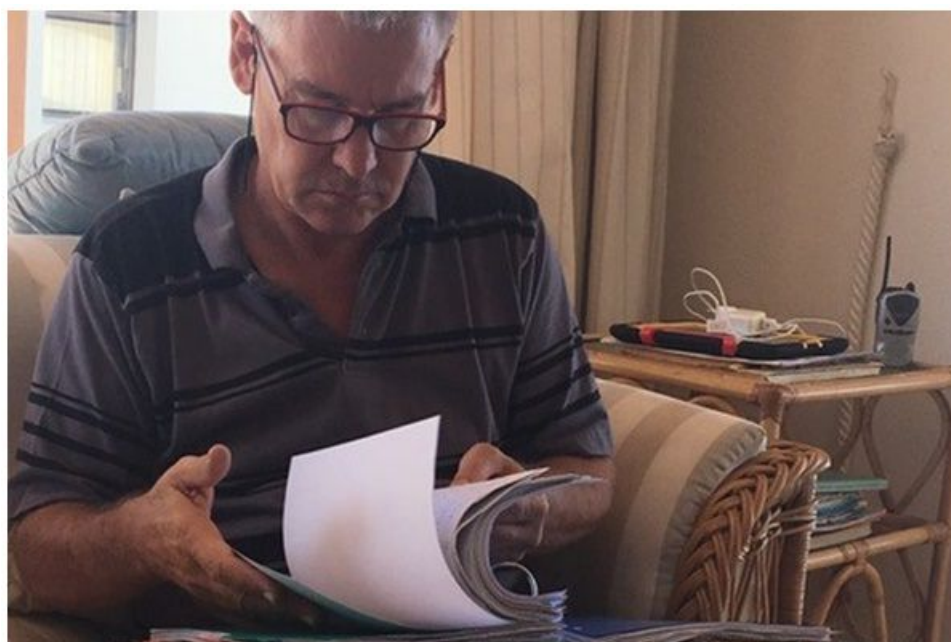
Raaiselkind is the story of a family whose son was diagnosed with autism. It's their journey, not so much a doccic about autism.

❑ ***How did you get involved in writing the screenplay?***

Annelie Botes trusted me enough to adapt her book into a screenplay, with a few provisos and final approval rights. She wanted to make sure that the film reflects the values in her book. It has to be clear that the ignorance and resentment towards the boy were that of the community and never from the mother.

Annelie writes extremely colourful dialogue. I had to make sure that I didn't add words that would not have fitted the personality or uniqueness of her characters.

Film language had to be cleared with her, for example: In her book, the husband commits suicide, alone on a bridge away from everything and everyone. No one to witness his act of desperation. In the film, he hangs himself in the front garden, from the very swing that has lovingly built that has brought so much joy to his children. This, whilst his family is at home, in plain view of everyone. Almost opposite actions, the one in the book and film, but – same result. Annelie approved this change.



Pieter Esterhuizen

❑ ***How did you connect with the story on a personal level?***

Annelie pretty much crossed that bridge for me. One of the many truths that she wrote was “we tend to share each other's joys, not our sorrows”. If anything, *Raaiselkind* made me aware that I too am guilty of that.

❑ ***Tell me about the process of adapting Annelie Botes's story?***

Adaptation is cut and paste. The skill and I suppose the secret is what to cut and paste so that we stay true to the story.

I read her book from end to end a couple of times, to try and determine the main and sub-plots and to get a grip on the storyline.

Raaiselkind has two timelines. One reality weekend, where the nine-year-old child is found dead in the bath, the mother is arrested, and taken in for questioning. And another in past occurrences. From her pregnancy up and until the boy's death. Random, unrelated. The interrogation sequence had to be interwoven with the past occurrences, and this is where I had to decide what stays and what gets left out.

Relationships and events that received pages of dialogue and descriptive detail in the book fell by the wayside in the film. I often told Annelie that we have enough stuff for two or more full feature films, and sometimes reluctantly had to let characters and sub-plots go.

I then start at the beginning of the book and capture significant dialogue in chronological order. The first draft screenplay was twice the length that we needed. It worked out to 178 pages on the 'final draft' script format (it roughly equates to a page a minute), DTI requires that a film be at least 90 minutes long. The cinema likes them between 90 and 100 minutes (they can then fit five screenings per day).

Then comes the sad part. If a scene or character does not advance the main story. Delete it. Also, every other scene that bears relation to this. You end up deleting gems. Scenes that you will forever miss for not being part of the film. For example, in the book the mother Ingrid had a full-time career and social life filled with friends and colleges. Colourful personalities. In the film, they are only mentioned in passing, and not even by name.

I then swopped some scenes around, or break up long scenes and offset them with others. If your scene exceeds a page and a half, the audience will get bored with either the location or the action. You have to intercut with another occurrence. So instead of having two long-ish scenes one after the other. You have eight or more short ones, interrupting each other.



Finally, and this is the most difficult. I try and replace dialogue with picture/action. I try and apply rule one of filmmaking, 'show it, don't say it'.

The film explores the unrelenting burden of autism on an average, loving family and shows the disintegration of the family as a result. Your views on this?

The family did not break up from the inside. It's the external factors that cause the chaos. Lack of understanding and support from the school, church, community, medical experts, friends and family. The one and the only person that stood by the mother's side, from the day Alexander was born until the bitter end was her domestic Miriam. She said to the investigating officer: "Nie ge-verdra nie, ge-liefd (not tolerated – loved)," when asked about her relationship with the little boy.

■ ***Was it a difficult process from page to screen?***

It was difficult from novel to screenplay, because you have to reduce a 270+ page gem into a 90-100 page screenplay.

■ ***Tell me about working as a team writing the screenplay. How did your process work?***

Annelie and I worked much more as a team than me and Lize. Lize was appointed by Jan du Plessis (M Nett Licensee) to fine tune the screenplay to make it, in his view, less documentary and more story-like (forever grateful that she came on board).

■ ***Did you collaborate with Annelie Botes?***

Yes. It's after all her original work. I had to know what Annelie wanted to keep in and what was important to her. It was imperative that she recognises her story in the screenplay. Adaptations can sometimes be so ego driven that it ends up being a far cry from the original work.

■ ***What do you think makes a great screenplay?***

A great story, if it's an adaptation. An even greater story if it's an original. It has to touch the audience on an emotional level, therefore know from word one if you are writing a movie or a film. Sally Campher (*Raaiselkind* film producer) nails it: "Whereas a movie fulfils audience expectations, a film has to evoke a change in them." *Raaiselkind* is a film.



■ ***How do you see the future of the South African film industry?***

Super bright for some, not so much for others. If you are the flavour of the month (year) you will receive support from investors, distributors, government incentives. If not, you have to be creative and find ways and means to succeed 'in spite of'.

■ ***What advice do you have for aspirant writers who want to get their screenplays on the big screen?***

Never ever ever stop writing. Writing is one percent inspiration and 99% perspiration. Natural talent and opportunity means bummer all if you don't develop your craft.

Screenplays have to conform to film rules. If you want to break them like Picasso did with his abstract art, make sure you are Picasso.

Never lose focus who you are writing for. Not the TV editors, script-buyers, critics, film fest judges. Not even for yourself. Write for your audience, your customer, the person who you hope will take the time, effort and money to go to the movies or subscribe to or stream the end result of your screenplay.

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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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