

# Henk Pretorius chats new horror film 'The Unfamiliar' and filmmaking during Covid-19

 By [Daniel Dercksen](#)

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Filmmaker Henk Pretorius rooted his career with some of South Africa's most loved comedies and dramatic features - the *Bakgat* trilogy, *Fanie Fourie Se Labola*, *Leading Lady* - and co-founded the Britain-based company Dark Matter Studios in 2012 with Llewellynn Greeff. He directed *The Unfamiliar* in 2020 which was released on the virtual market.

*The Unfamiliar* is now available for streaming in South Africa via DSTV Box Office, Google Play and iTunes.



Llewellynn Greeff & Henk Pretorius

Henk Pretorius shares a few thoughts with Daniel Dercksen.

■ ***The last time we saw each other we were having drinks in Green Point before pursuing our dreams, now we are living in a world we could never have imagined.***

My dad used to say: "Don't forget to celebrate life, to slow down sometimes and to acknowledge how mythical it all is." And that's something that stayed with me and got a more poignant meaning in the current pandemic. Even though it is devastating to a lot of people's livelihoods, and I have immense empathy for them, I do feel that the pandemic had a lasting, and dare I say 'positive impact' on me. I have never wanted to create more and appreciated that I have always been able to make films than now.

■ ***Although the dreams of many filmmakers were hijacked by the outbreak of the pandemic, you persevered, being fervently proactive in the pursuit of releasing your first film in Hollywood.***

We had to adapt our cinematic release in the USA to a 'digital release' overnight. And it was with a clear plan, lots of effort and the support of a major distribution company in the USA that we have been fortunate to still matter as a film in a very cluttered market space.

I think cinema has changed forever, but in the creative world of storytelling, we have found a new way to reach audiences. There are lots to do still seeing that *The Unfamiliar* is going out across the globe and, in some countries, cinematically, but we have embraced the opportunity to adapt and to evolve.

■ ***You moved from familiar grounds in South Africa to *The Unfamiliar*. What sparked this remarkable journey?***

Thank you for the compliment. When you go to LA and London, as a filmmaker, you do start your career over. In South Africa, I was at a point in my career where filmmaking was what I did as a job, and abroad I had to fight for that privilege again.

What motivated me to take on the fight was my A-type personality, not that I always buy into the concept of having a 'personality'. But the idea to throw me into a deeper pool and to see if I could swim out of it. I knew if I did end up 'swimming' I would learn a bunch of new skills, and that may, ultimately, (hopefully) make me a more well-rounded human and filmmaker. Yet, to quote my Afda professor: "There is still a price to pay." The price I had to pay was to give up my entire safety net. Luckily, I have teamed up with a phenomenal business partner and producer Llewellynn Greeff, and we supported each other in this quest.



■ ***How different is it being a filmmaker in South Africa from Hollywood/the UK?***

To borrow a rugby analogy: South Africa is like playing the Currie Cup with your national team. And making a film in the UK, for a predominantly USA market is similar to the World Cup. You are competing against the best of the best. And you are, honestly, learning as you go and hope you know enough to get to the next stage, which will ultimately lead you to a more significant challenge.

Fortunately, in the filmmaker world, I am still (relatively) young, with hopefully lots of years in front of me. I look forward to growing my skill level and understanding of the human condition as I go along.

■ ***Your film *Unfamiliar* resonated internationally with a world suddenly enveloped in fear? Does it also strike an important chord of how families cope when 'horror' strikes and divides loyal bonds?***

You have summed up the thematic very well.

Horrors have always been a relevant genre abroad, yet I do feel that *The Unfamiliar* sums up what the world is currently going through. At the core of the film is a mother trying to keep her family safe, and I feel that thematic does strongly resonate with audience members worldwide.

I recall witnessing the levels of anxiety that the test screening audience walked out with after seeing *The Unfamiliar* and thought to myself: "It kind of feels like I should apologise for scaring them." But that is the point of making a horror film, yet I do apologise in advance for any additional anxiety that was caused by the film.

Or maybe horror films help us deal with our anxiety through a 'safe' space to vent it. That idea makes more sense in my head than when I am saying it aloud, but horror fans often tell me that they enjoyed the film because it allowed them to vent their own (personal) anxiety.

### ▣ ***What inspired The Unfamiliar?***

I was hanging with marines in LA, at the time, just after their service in Iraq. I asked them all kinds of deeply personal questions about the war, and they chose to answer some of them. The way they chose not to discuss their own unique PTSD and the scars that the war left really intrigued me and the co-writer. So, we started thinking of creating a horror film that takes a look at a returning soldier with the possibility of them having PTSD.

Jennifer Nicole Stang, the co-writer of the film, told me about the wealth of Hawaiian mythology that she experienced in her research and also visiting the island. She shared these thick books she was reading, and it contained a treasure trove of mythical characters in it.

We then joined the two ideas together, and *The Unfamiliar* was born.

■ ***Fruitful collaboration is gold for any screenwriter/filmmaker – partner Llewellynn Greeff from Dark Matter Studios***

Every aspect of making a film evolves teamwork. Your film is ultimately only as strong as the sum of all parts, combined with a strong vision. With Llewellynn and I, we each have a separate list of things that we are responsible for, yet we both know that we can always rely on each other should we need to. It is a kind of symbiotic, egoless relationship that is governed by our mutual goal to create wealth through content. And, with wealth, I also mean a wealth of stories, not just in the monetary sense.

To find someone that you can trust as a business partner is very rare, but it does accelerate the speed in which one can achieve the sometimes almost impossible, together. Llewellynn calls this phenomenon: 'the speed of trust', and this is something that I am grateful to share with him in Dark Matter Studios.



■ ***Tell me about seeing a lot of opportunities in the current landscape.***

The consumption of content has grown by 30% since the lockdown, digitally. We have designed a digital marketing strategy that may develop into an agency that specialises in this space. However, we feel that there is a much more potentially lucrative model that we, as content creators, should look at 'investing' in. We are currently building towards filling this space. I am unfortunately not allowed to say anymore, but I do feel that what we are about to do is going to push our reach as a company with our value significantly up.

■ ***How do you see the future for screenwriters/filmmakers in our 'new normal'?***

I think the market will now be full of people that want to write, but with little producers left that can make/finance your screenplay. I would think smaller budgets, and with smaller cast members. One of the projects I am about to shoot has only six cast members in total and plays off 'around the block', we will probably be able to finance the pilot episode in a few days. This may turn into the next big show. Alternatively, be sold to a list of platforms as a once-off digital piece of content.

If you aim to make anything bigger than something you can 'shoot around the block', I would suggest the attachment of an A-list cast, with enough money and a strong enough concept, to compete internationally. If all goes to plan, we are shooting a similar project in February with this model. I will be more informed to comment on it after I have completed the project.

■ ***What do you, ultimately, hope audiences will get from their Unfamiliar experience?***

To not take your safety and security for granted and to enjoy and to protect it. To me, the film is an anti-war film, but I have realised that audiences only get that from viewing it a second time.



### ■ **What's next for Dark Matter Studios?**

We are shooting a pilot for a television show in a few weeks. We are then shooting a feature film that I have been working on for years this coming February. And we are also busy with an entirely new business model that has the potential to be embraced within the brave new world. We shall see, I don't take much for granted anymore and I am honestly just thrilled to be in a position of doing what I love.

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[Read more](#) about South African films and filmmaking.

## 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](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

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