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The business-savvy creative

by Helen Grange



Photo: WBS Journal.

For someone so accomplished, you'd imagine him burning the midnight oil in a vast, mahogany-filled office full of books about film and theatre. But no, Deon Opperman, a colossus in the TV and theatre world, occupies a small office adjoining his wife Janine's music studio in their riverside house in Onrus near Hermanus. And most of the books in his shelves are about macro-economics, and text books he bought during his [MBA](#) course at WBS.

"I used to have about 3 000 books. I gave them away to Afda. Now I read on a Kindle," he says.

This cosy nook is where Opperman – writer, director and producer of over 50 English and Afrikaans theatre productions – thinks, makes Skype calls and writes scripts. "Being a content generator, I can work anywhere, and as we speak I'm looking onto the Onrus River from the window in my office. So my workspace might be small but the view sure beats the 10 foot wall I looked onto in Jo'burg," he says.

These days Opperman produces mostly for the Afrikaans TV channel KykNET. His audiences will know him best as the writer and producer of *Donkerland*, the third drama series in his epic Afrikaans trilogy, of which *Kruispad* and *Hartland* formed the first and second parts. His *Getroud met Rugby* series, which screened from 2008 to 2012, was also widely watched. English viewers will remember him as producer of the daily soap, *Backstage*.

He has his own company, Packed House Productions, and still has an office in Johannesburg and three full-time staff. When production is in full swing, he will spend weeks in the city and his team can swell to 50. "It's not called show business for nothing. It's full-on operational management. You have staff, managers and, most importantly, deadlines that in our profession can't be extended. There's no such thing as postponing a screening date or opening night," he says.

Which brings us to why he did an MBA, an unusual choice for someone in the entertainment industry. "I was the seventh entertainment person to do an MBA, and my classmates were quite amused to see me there. But I badly needed to learn, because Afda at the time was 'growing broke' – it was expanding faster than the cash flow could handle – and neither Garth Holmes (co-founder) nor I had an inkling about how to run a business. Spreadsheets were a novelty to us," he says.

True to form, Opperman put his all into the course, and says it was "life changing" not only for him personally, but for Afda (which originally stood for African Film Drama Arts) as an organisation. "I was fortunate in that I didn't work for anyone else, so I could immediately implement what I learned. So in effect, Afda went through an MBA, because I was using it as a real-life case study. It served me well, because I got an A," he beams.

Opperman introduced linear programming to work out costing and pricing, and overhauled all the systems from cash flow to administration, and within a year Afda had increased its profits by R1 million. "Afda is a great entrepreneurial success story," he says.

Yet unlike industries marketing familiar products, Opperman's personal business is by nature high risk, as every script he generates is new and untested until the ratings come in. "Actually, the older I get and the more I see, the more I realise no-one knows exactly what's going on. Everybody's kind of guessing, even in the mining industry! But at least in my industry you can't commit fraud," he laughs.

He might be a creative, but Opperman has always had a couple of business fundamentals up his sleeve. "My father was the regional director in the Eastern Cape of Joko Tea. Two years before he died, he asked me, 'Do you think I'm wealthy?' He explained that he wasn't, because he'd always been a company employee on a salary. He told me, 'Make sure you own what you create.' It was an important message and it has stayed with me," he says.

The "products" he sells are dramas and soaps, which are "distributed" through KykNET, he explains. Opperman likes using these terms when he addresses his staff. "I tell them, remember, we are selling Surf and Omo. We are in the business of selling a 'product' that reaches the widest possible 'market'," he says.

Through trial and error, his own 'product' has been honed and fine-tuned to net a huge following. "I've made it my mission to really understand my audience, from the ultra conservative to PC-verby (beyond politically correct), and that's why my work does well. It's that simple. My motto is: make sure you capture your audience, then take them with you. You can't blame your audience if your product doesn't sell. You need to go back to the drawing board. It's amazing how many artists don't get that," he says.

Fortunately, modern technology is what has allowed him to ply his trade in a sleepy hollow by the coast. "My industry is a collaborative one, and I develop scripts with my partner in Cape Town. We can see what the other is writing in real time... it's amazing," he says. Stress, though, is a constant in Opperman's life, which is inevitable in a writer as prolific as he is.

It doesn't help that he worries about the future, believing that the economy in the US "is in profound violation of the laws of thermodynamics". "When you print money, you are making up energy out of nothing. I believe the global first-world economies are headed for another huge recession, worse than 2008," he says.

At least Opperman has acquired the life he's always wanted. When I call he's cooking mielies for his teenage step-son, and his wife is composing music in her studio. "And when you have a river and the sea on your doorstep, it reminds you that the entire world isn't coming to an end. You get the proper perspective on things. But I still have a vegetable garden, just in case," he laughs.