



Ofer Lapid

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Ofer Lapid, Gearhouse

Sitting opposite Ofer Lapid at one of his favourite restaurants in Johannesburg, The Schwarma Company in Norwood, it is easy to tell how his zealous spirit has led Gearhouse South Africa to be recognized as a world-wide phenomenon. Gearhouse South Africa walked away with the Favourite International Production Company of the Year at the TPI Awards Ceremony held in London during February 2008, competing against top players such as Stageco, Jands Production Company, Spectra, Ampco, Flashlight and Clair Brothers Audio.

At the local TPSA Awards held in March 2008, Ofer received "The Lifetime Achievement Award," and Gearhouse accepted an additional six trophies, a testament to a talented and hard working team. (Visit www.gearhouse.co.za for more details).

"In the early days people did not believe that this type of business could exist in a proper way," says Ofer, sitting back in his chair with a lit cigar. His story and the success of Gearhouse today is no less diverse and enthralling than the inside pages of a Wilbur Smith novel.

Born and raised in Israel by his educated father and mother, a lawyer and teacher respectively, Ofer did not like school and left at the age of 14. After spending a couple of years in the military, Ofer started lending a hand in the entertainment industry and finally arrived in South Africa in 1985 at the age of 25 when travelling on a world-wide rock and roll tour with an Israeli band.

Ofer's first official employment in the country was for a show titled "Its all over Habibi" playing at the Civic Theatre. Later, a chap by the name of Allen Geen (Colosseum Acoustic) approached him to create lighting design for an event in the Rand Stadium. Within two weeks he was on tour, visiting various "townships" in the area with the production "High Energy".

In and around August 1985, when Micky Lehr held the position of the Chief Lighting Designer at the Pretoria State Theatre, Ofer was appointed at the same theatre as Junior Lighting Technician. Within a year, he moved to Sun City to work under Mark Ransom where fellow colleagues included Tom Swan and Carl Impi.

"After a year at Sun City, I recognised the need for updated technology in SA and for people to invest back into their companies," says Ofer. "This is a very tiring business as you have to reinvest in equipment the whole time. The last ten years have become even more demanding, in AV more than lighting."

With this in mind, Ofer moved to Johannesburg in 1987, and started working on his own. One of his largest gigs, "Unfinished Story Tour" with the band Stimela, took place in the 80s, where certain members of the production were also back-up singers for Paul Simon. On tour with Ofer were Attie van Wyk, Micky Lehr, Johan Griessel and "Kentse" (Andile Mpahlwa), today a partner at Gearhouse South Africa. "Unfortunately the tour was stopped in the middle due to a horrific car accident which claimed the lives of 3 people; things got complicated and I moved on to the movie industry."

Working on eight different feature movies and some 2 dozen commercials Ofer toiled from electrician to gaffer. Here he met his wife Nicola, a unit manager and film producer.

After completing a period piece titled "The Fourth Reich", Ofer received a call from promoter Roddy Quinn and artist Johnny Clegg in 1989, asking if he would join them on a 12 month tour. Ofer, in turn, asked Nicola to tour with him and handle the production side of the show. Hiring gear from Production Projects, the Lamphouse, Southern Lighting and Sound on Stage, Ofer realised that if he was to make his career in

the industry, he would have to purchase his own equipment.

Thirty-year-old Ofer opened Lighting Unlimited in 1989, found an investor, travelled to the UK, and in 1991 brought a container filled with second hand lighting equipment back to South Africa. In 1993, he established a staging company called Stage Design and in 1995 Ofer purchased four generators and Woza Power was born. In 1996 he sold all three companies to UK based Gearhouse PLC.

Ofer remained in the employ of Gearhouse for the next five years. At that time Gearhouse SA was one of 48 branches around the world.

Then the Gearhouse Group went into receivership. In 2001 Ofer bought the South African branch back from the liquidators. "The SA operation had been trading throughout the receivership of the UK branch. Perhaps the wise thing would have been to let the business go bankrupt and buy back the gear, but a lot of people would have been badly affected along the way; my suppliers, crew, the bank, and it would have damaged the industry. No matter what people may think, I actually do care."

Ofer did not change the name of the company. "I knew the brand was very good and well known. Instead of spending money on new stationery, I rather bought Robe," he laughs. Ofer has experienced fulfilment watching his "baby" grow, and it has been a privilege for him to work with people, to be part of a creative team, to see the power of shows, and to tackle any challenges that come his way.

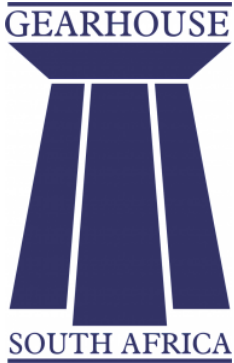
Regarding the future in South Africa, Ofer and Gearhouse are sticking it out.

"I love South Africa, I'm an idealist and I'm not packing up and going. We have to work together to solve the challenges of running a business in this country with a positive attitude. At Gearhouse we are working on more sales, better packages, better service and attention to detail. Innovation is key. We are working very hard to ensure training is consistent, to uplift our standards, and are introducing measures that will ensure better delivery, with regard to client communication and meeting client's needs."

Commuting between Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town on a weekly basis, besides travelling abroad up to six times a year, Ofer prefers to reserve his weekends and school breaks for family. "I love the bush, I love walking in nature, good food, good wine and getting to sleep six hours a night."

Ofer describes Nicola as his backbone who keeps the household together, which comprises of their three

children and a farmyard of animals including fish, cats, dogs, birds, hamsters and guinea pigs. Although not common knowledge, Ofer enjoys surfing. Look in the cold Cape Town Ocean and you may just find him paddling with his son sitting at the end of admittedly long surfboard!



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