

## Q& A with *Dominee Tienie* director Sallas De Jager

By  Daniel Dercksen

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Daniel Dercksen chats to producer-writer-director Sallas De Jager about *Dominee Tienie*, a new South African film that poignantly shows how true belief binds humanity.

A proud graduate of The Writing Studio, De Jager also enjoyed great success with his films - *Free State*, *Stuur Groete aan Mannetjies Roux*, *Musiek vir die Agtergrond* - and crafted the screenplay for *Dominee Tienie*, based on the one-man play of the same name, written by Dana Snyman, who is also producing and directing the film.



Featuring Frank Opperman in the title role, who reprises on the big screen the role he played on stage, the film tells the story of a priest who needs to win back his confidence if he is to again become the light he once was for everyone around him.

After 16 years as the pastor of the mother church, Tienie Benade is confronted with a steep decline in the number of churchgoers and a modern society that is rapidly changing. Do clergymen, or even the church, still have a role to play in this world? He is trying his best to adapt and make sense of the changes, but, in the process, he is alienating his wife and children. After an incident with a dying vagrant, Tienie finds himself at a crossroads. Would he be able to regain his self-confidence and win back the love of his family and would he be brave enough to provide guidance to his congregation in this new era?

■ ***Watching a movie is not as fulfilling as experiencing it. The experience of being part of an audience at The Showroom in the heart of the Karoo at a preview screening clearly showed what lasting impact Dominee Tienie had on the audience; they laughed and wept wholeheartedly and undertook an emotional journey with the characters.***

Thank you, that's a great compliment. This is a skill I constantly work on and it will be something I will probably still work for years before even coming close to mastering it.

It is a combination of factors that come into play.

It starts with loving every character in the story and having empathy for their individual flaws.

As a writer, you must then set up believable situations that will have a ripple effect on the story as a whole and gently manipulate the setting to set up clear goals and obstacles for each scene for every character in that scene. This enables the actors to bring out the subtext. Then you add the camera as our window into the scene.



■ ***Theme is often a stepchild in many films, but with Dominee Tienie your thematic purpose resonates well with the audience, with universal themes of acceptance and redemption leaving plenty of food for thought.***

I think the golden thread as far as the main theme is concerned is not to be afraid of change, it is inevitable. We all share the fear of the unknown and thus in basic terms, we fear losing control, something nobody can really claim to have. But if we can be courageous enough to take a leap of faith for the right reasons it could change our lives for the better. That's what Tienie reluctantly does in this story and not without fear and not without risk and that's why we root for him!

■ ***The film poignantly explores the role of a clergyman in our cyber world brimming with fake news and false ideals.***

I can only imagine how hard it must be for them. And it changed so quickly. It takes a special kind of person to believe he can guide others through this maze of information or at the very least – just to be brave enough to try.

The film shows that true belief binds humanity.

Interesting observation and a good one. The film does show that it should be the case, but the film, more importantly, raises the question: *why* is it not so in reality? The answer will be in the eye of the beholder, I guess?



■ ***What inspired you to bring a well-travelled and beloved local play to the big screen?***

The premise of a preacher who lost his sense of purpose and being vulnerable enough to admit that he is not sure where fits in within our modern society intrigued me immediately.

I read the stage play before I saw it for the first time. I saw the images and the people Tienie spoke about in his sermon immediately whilst reading it and knew I had to at least give the screenplay a shot and see happens.

■ ***How difficult was it writing the screenplay, turning a dialogue-driven story into a visual medium?***

It was harder than I anticipated. It required going back to the basics of screenwriting. Starting with a solid objective and subjective structure and once that was done, making sure that you add action, add goals and obstacles for all the characters.

Also making sure that within the combination of the context of the story and the intended target audience that the stakes are clear and understood.

For me, the challenge during the writing was always to make sure that the characters are part of the day to day world of the church, for that reason most of the work went into writing interesting characters who speaks and acts authentically and they make believable decisions under pressure.





### ▣ ***How personal was this film to you?***

It was quite personal to me from the start. Having grown up in a small Afrikaans town in the '80s and early '90s I was incredibly moved by a *Dominee* asking: "Who am I, where do I fit in?"

The child in me instantly asked: "If an Afrikaans Dominee doesn't know where he fits in, where do I fit in?"

And I had to sit back and look at my own life, my own marriage, my kids, my career, and the world around me and it quickly raised questions to which most didn't have simple answers.

### ▣ ***How do you relate to Dominee Tienie?***

I am not getting younger and will move into my 40s soon, I'm a father, a husband, a leader when I have to be, working in an industry that changes all the time. I'm a teacher, and a confidant and a friend. I don't like confrontation. I'm not always sure what is expected of me from society. I always feels it is better to care more as opposed to too little.



### ▣ ***What do you think makes Dominee Tienie such a fascinating character?***

He is supposed to have to answers to the big questions or so it is believed by his flock. It can never be true, but it makes everyone around him feel safe so and what an unfair burden to carry for a human being. It takes tremendous courage for

him to be vulnerable.

■ ***You were also blessed working with Frank Opperman on this project, how much did he influence the writing of the screenplay, and the transformation from stage to film?***

It was an incredible experience. There is so much I can say about Frank but what meant a lot to me and it is something I aspire to be if I ever reach that place in my career where people recognise you as an icon – he respects the process as well as the structures of filmmaking. From day one he trusted me and it was an absolute joy to work with him.

The play is very different in dialogue as well as in structure and even though Frank did the play more than 250 times he had to start over for the film. It was fantastic to go on this journey with him.



■ ***It is interesting how you took us into the heart and soul of a world that seems far removed from our own lives, but is not that different from the struggles of our everyday lives?***

Thank you for recognising this. It comes back to a man regaining his confidence. For a typical or maybe it's more accurate to say for a traditional NG *Dominee* the church grounds become a bit of an island and this to me was a fantastic metaphor for the comfort zones we create for ourselves.

We are all guilty of falling into a routine of going to the same places, seeing the same people doing the same activities. Once again, we do this because it creates an illusion of safety.

We, as humans, however, need to be part of something or at least have a need for a sense of community. The danger, however, is the fact that the moment you get stuck in a comfort zone you often have little chance to grow and in fact, you are afraid of change because you are afraid of losing that feeling of safety whether it's real or not.

■ ***Tell me about your next project?***

I have been working on a few things over the last 18 months but I don't know which will happen first. What I can tell you is that I'll be focusing more on directing for the immediate future. I had a very productive few years but it feels like I need to live a little again before writing again. Well you never know, ask again tomorrow.

*Dominee Tienie* opens in cinemas nationwide tomorrow, 25 January 2019.

Read more about the latest South African films: [here](#).

## 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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