



PROFILE

Woman of steel

From trader to auctioneer — and with stories to tell

Adele Shevel

● Ariella Kuper combines her role as auctioneer with seller and storyteller.

One of the leaders in her field, she can stand for hours selling a variety of items and, without a note, has a range of anecdotes and knowledge that keeps the audience engaged.

Kuper was an international steel trader in Macsteel International for almost 10 years. Upon her return to South Africa in 2006 she sought work in a similar area.

At the time there were no women in the auction sector and certainly no specialists in her field of steel.

"If you sell a Picasso you go to Sotheby's or Christie's. But if you wanted mining equipment, there was no focused auction house," she says. "So I steadily became a niche player building a team of experts in mining and related assets."

This attracted serious attention and her company, Clear Asset, established in 2012, took off globally, reaching R1bn in asset sales in a few years. Even without maritime experience, shipping became part of the company in 2008 through Transhex, whose mining assets it was selling.

Transhex was pulling out of deep-sea mining and had a diamond tanker to sell from Luderitz.

Kuper sold it to a Russian buyer seven weeks later for four times its reserve value. "I never stopped trading. I simply morphed from pure steel into

steel-related assets." Today her company is the leading auction house of maritime assets under judicial arrest in South Africa and Namibia.

Her most recent business, Solution Strategists, has sold about \$90m-\$100m in arrested maritime vessels since 2019, from oil tankers to cargo ships, fishing vessels, or associated cargo (such as 600,000 barrels of sanctioned Venezuelan crude oil last January).

Her commercial shipping auction business raised \$85m

in the past two years and she raises money in charity auctions, about R120m in South Africa, the UK and the US.

It all began with a love of art, and along with an honours in economics and an MBA, mixed with a wide curiosity and global travel (living in Italy, Israel, London, New York, Miami and Vienna) Kuper entered auctioneering and founded businesses along the way.

So what makes a good auctioneer? Kuper says it's selling the story, not just the item. "The story is what people buy into."

Charity auctions are about fun and philanthropy. "The speed of bid calling is part of the entertainment ... peppered with humour and random unknown facts. People want a feel-good factor and not to feel they overpaid. The secret is to not use notes, engage with the audience and keep it fast and light."

Commercial ship auctions

are serious because values are huge. Kuper's judicial-arrest ship auctions are dollar denominated because they're global. The speed of bid calling is slow and requires patience.

After Covid, most maritime auctions are done online, ensuring anonymity and removing travel costs. "To achieve this and earn the trust of high-calibre bidders, it is about ensuring a turnkey of service, of accuracy, of due diligence, credibility of handling forex funds received, and providing absolute professionalism."

Maritime auctions, she says, have their own story, own challenges, own characteristics and a specific target market. "You never get bored."

The time it takes is demanding and intense, but "the thrill of ... learning about each vessel and the associated story and the reason for its arrest makes it fascinating. Interacting with senior partners at top law firms [in South Africa and globally], foreign financial institutions and notable buyers keeps you focused."

Kuper's resilience helped get her through cancer three times (in 2016, 2018 and 2022). "You get stronger with each episode," she says. "Being a victim won't make the condition go away." She approaches each cancer with "huge research" and a team of experts around her. "It's almost how one approaches a business transaction – you ensure the right players are in place for the best possible outcome."

She conducted the auction of an oil tanker a week after her fourth red devil chemo session and achieved her highest price to date – \$26.4m.

Having sold 51% of the company she founded to Thebe in 2017, she started Solution Strategists in July 2019.

Kuper also provides economic analysis and valuations on sales and is a keynote speaker at conferences on women in business. **X**

