

Festivals as crucibles of social inclusion: Perspectives from the Klein Karoo

-Brett Pyper, CEO, Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (Absa KKNK)

Over the five years that I have had the privilege of overseeing preparations for, and the delivery of, the annual Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (Absa KKNK), the impression has repeatedly been brought home to me that people experience this remarkable event on the South African arts calendar in terms of extremes. Just as mind-shifting and transformative the thought and work may be that artists from far and wide bring to our stages and exhibition spaces, or however euphoric the sentiment of the tens of thousands of *feesgeeste* who revel in the carnivalisation of an entire Karoo town for over a week, and despite accolades from visitors like Former President Mandela, then-President Mbeki, and successive Western Cape Premiers representing various political parties, others, many of whom have admittedly never attended, routinely cast the festival as a throwback to the cultural laagers of the apartheid past, or an enactment of newer South African forms of exclusion. Some of these extremes have to do with important, unfinished business in our national psyche and the place of Afrikaans within it. Others relate to the social and political setting in which the festival is presented. But several have to do with the nature of festivals in general, and the particular ways in which they have become vehicles for the reconfiguration of the South African public sphere since 1994.

At their best, festivals concentrate opportunities for artists, audiences, sponsors and industry stakeholders, often doing so outside of official institutions and away from traditional centres of artistic and cultural activity. In the unlikely setting of an agricultural region best known for being the centre of the ostrich industry, the Absa KKNK presents roughly as much theatre over 8 days as a major cultural institution like the Market Theatre does in a year. To that we add dozens of art exhibitions, classical and popular music, dance and street theatre, literary and lifestyle presentations and literally hundreds of outdoor music performances (as many as 752 half-hour sets of music on our outdoor stages in 2011). Given the scale of this enterprise, festivals like ours inevitably also concentrate competition for exposure and resources. The massing together of energies that festivals enable brings with it a heightening of disparities within the arts and culture sector in terms of who is best positioned to access the opportunities that festivals provide. Thus festivals often become manifestations of broader social, cultural, educational and economic inequalities. Questions of access appropriately assume considerable importance in contexts where economically active and culturally mobilised audiences who are able and willing to travel long distances and to pay their way to support the arts rub shoulders with members of local communities who on

economic grounds alone could not afford to participate, and who face a range of educational and other obstacles to fuller participation besides. To blame festivals for this situation would be to shoot the messenger: by virtue of their concentrated energies, festivals make visible both the creativity *and* the obstacles to full civic participation that characterise the communities in which they are embedded, as well as the temporary ones that they convene. The strategic challenge is to maximise their positive dimensions, which are considerable, while addressing some of the social truths that they bring to the surface of public life.

In South Africa since the end of the apartheid era, as in several other countries, festivals have come to supplement, or even replace or stand in for, many of the roles performed by traditional institutions like theatres, concert halls, galleries and art, music or drama schools (for the moment, I am limiting my reference to Western cultural institutions, but please read on). Festivals now routinely take upon themselves functions – like the commissioning of new artistic work, developing emerging talent, or cultivating new audiences – that elsewhere are the responsibilities of resident theatre companies, conservatories and other specialised training institutions, the general education system, and social agencies. In doing so, festivals are challenged, despite being project-oriented, periodic events, to address social, cultural and artistic imperatives that require ongoing developmental intervention. And they often do so in geographically and economically marginalised locales which are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy and are often at the coalface of social and cultural change.

It is in this respect that the authorities, civic leadership and civil society in the places in which festivals take place have a crucial role to play in ensuring that the energies, skills, economic and other benefits that festivals periodically provide percolate through to local communities and are nurtured, between festivals, in such a way that those who potentially stand the most to gain from access to events of national reach on their home soil – centrally, members of disadvantaged communities, who seldom can travel to the cities to participate in the arts – genuinely and sustainably benefit. No matter how well intentioned or artistically and commercially successful the annual festival might be, an event of 8 days' duration cannot in itself overcome the inequalities, prejudices and skills deficits that persist in its host communities for the rest of the year. While our festival management has to keep its eye on developments in the arts nationally in an ever more competitive festival sector, which has its own disparities and unfinished transformations to deal with, while simultaneously being receptive to the needs of our host communities, our work rests on the goodwill of a range of role players who may differ on policy and political issues but who share a stake in the event's success. And the latter relies quite heavily on a constructive relationship with local

authorities and other role players. Because of its scale – by many counts the Absa KKNK is the country's most popular festival of its type – and its impact – the festival remains the largest launching pad for new work for the stage in Afrikaans, and is also the arts festival in South Africa with the greatest local economic impact – the Absa KKNK intensifies the already concentrated dimensions of festivals described above. It is widely known that Oudtshoorn has, at least since the turn of the millennium, been highly unstable in the political sphere. The legitimate frustrations of often fragmented groupings are periodically and misguidedly projected onto the festival. Often this has very little to do with securing access to the arts for Oudtshoorn's most needy communities. Rather, it entails competing groupings positioning themselves in relation to one another in the reflected media attention of one prominent event around which they are annually assured of some degree of visibility.

There are, however, many people in Greater Oudtshoorn, from diverse backgrounds, who are profoundly supportive of the work the festival does and who also regularly make suggestions on how our work can be improved. Suggestions that have come from Oudtshoorn residents in recent years that have found tangible expression in our annual festival include the extension of our audience development programmes to incorporate an outstanding festival programme for high school learners, embedded in the broader festival. Titled **klap!**, this programme has, thanks to the support of the provincial department of education, been made accessible to learners from all the focus schools for the arts in the Western Cape, of which close to 80% of participants come from disadvantaged communities. Another example, now in its second year, involves a highly skilled and socially conscious local documentary photographer offering a series of workshops in visual literacy to members of marginalised communities around Oudtshoorn. The process of this sort of project is as important as the outcome, which in this instance leads to a collaborative exhibition in which some of the town's least visible communities tell their compelling stories. Significantly, the project has to date addressed people living on the street, the municipal waste '*tiep*' and a impoverished forced removal community as people with imaginations and points of view that can and should be articulated on the public platforms that the festival provides. Unfortunately, because of the composite nature of festivals, some of the festival's critics who share our concerns in overcoming social, cultural and economic boundaries never see this aspect of our work.

Festivals are multi-layered events, which narrow the physical but also the social and cultural distances between the likes of the opera house, the rock festival and the *kerkbasaar*. Festivals expect much from their artists and organisers, but also from their audiences, who need to acquaint themselves with a lot of information in advance in order to get the most out

of them. People encounter our festival at various levels, selecting from a dizzying variety of events, ranging from the frenzied taking in of a year's worth of theatrical premières and exhibition openings, to a week-long *jol* in the company of friends, to watching this all from the streets of Oudtshoorn. I mentioned earlier that a festival such as ours has to do some of the work of a theatre company, a professional gallery, a conservatoire and an after-school education centre, but what mitigates the often specialised, sometimes characterised as elitist, connotations of this aspect of our work is the particular way in which members of our festival public bring their vernacular forms of festivity with them to the festival. All around our official arts programme, Oudtshoorn's parks, campgrounds, public spaces and streets are filled to overflowing by thousands of visitors who bring with them the foods, entertainment features and *accoutrement* of the proverbial *kerkbasaar*, *landbouskou*, *Nuwejaarspieknies* and so on. While some members of our audiences who view themselves primarily as art lovers can find this vernacular exuberance a bit much, others experience it as a true manifestation of festivity, sometimes recasting its familiar contours in unexpected ways. A colleague from the Langkloof pointed out to me that the indigenous Khoi peoples of this region had their own festival traditions around harvest and hunting feasts, and that festivals like ours offer potential points of reconnection with this pre-colonial past.

A festival like the Absa KKNK creates a virtual public for 8 days that becomes a microcosm of the Afrikaans-oriented sphere, with all its internal complexities and contradictions, as well as its often ambiguous relationships to a broader post-apartheid South African culture. It makes citizens of what elsewhere are parallel worlds visible to one another. People from all walks of life, from thespians to dabblers in the arts, arriving from far-flung cities or small-holdings down the road, encompassing farmers, farm workers, and a true diversity of visitors, encounter each other in what may be one of the last remaining spaces in our local as well as our national life where people truly gather as a public. Beyond the protective cordons of festivals on campuses or the theatres that nowadays are built in access-controlled malls or casinos, Oudtshoorn's festival encompasses stage, '*stalletjie*' and street and enables a collective experience that is internally diverse but nonetheless broadly shared. The equivalent of this situation would be, I often point out to colleagues, to have to manage what is presented at, e.g., the Baxter Theatre in relation to what happens in the restaurants and bars of Rondebosch, or the programming at Artscape with what happens on the streets of the Foreshore. Though we are in the first instance arts managers, my colleagues and I at the Absa KKNK have taken on the challenge of crafting an integrated festival public that encompasses an entire Karoo town, at multiple levels.

Herein, when it works, amidst all the attendant pitfalls and vulnerabilities, lies this particular festival's transformative role and continuing potential. In spite, indeed precisely *because*, it takes place in a place where lingering old-school racial divides *and* newly emergent, racialised economic disparities are made visible, it is a festival that is walking the talk of creatively and persistently overcoming cultural and social boundaries. Many of the ways in which we pursue this, like working hard with schools to cultivate an informed, empowered and diverse audience for the future, or providing platforms for younger artists who as yet have limited brand recognition on TV, or inviting farm workers and rural township residents to participate in the festival as active cultural citizens, are not immediately visible. But we welcome questions about access and inclusion, because pursuing them with integrity in sustainable ways is among our most abiding concerns. At a time at which the centrifugal forces that I sense are becoming stronger as the structural limits of the broader South African transition have become clearer, this feels ever more challenging.

I close with a few questions we ask of ourselves when we contemplate the need to balance broad inclusivity with the logistical, financial, artistic and cultural demands of successfully staging our festival, and invite interested parties to debate them with us:

- Though it is widely known that the history and use of Afrikaans, the *lingua franca* of the Klein Karoo, is not limited to any racially or ethnically defined grouping in South Africa, our experience teaches us that there remain vast disparities within Afrikaans-speaking communities with respect to participation in the arts. Also that potentially inclusive language-based identities often end up being mapped in ways that perpetuate inherited, and newly redefined, racial or ethnic ones. What, we ask of ourselves and all our partners, can be done to engage all who speak or understand Afrikaans to freely celebrate and share in its achievements as a vehicle for creative and artistic expression?
- How can those members of Afrikaans-speaking communities who have historically been marginalised, and in many places continue to feel so, be encouraged to assume the roles of active cultural citizens, on par with those that are already highly mobilised?
- What unfinished business remains unaddressed in accounting for the privileging of Afrikaans under apartheid and how can the need for redress find constructive and creative expression by means of the arts?
- Recognising the official underdevelopment of the arts in rural communities of colour under the former dispensation, how can we learn from, and reverse the effects of, policies implemented since 1994 that have served to perpetuate, or exacerbate,

disparities in access to learning and culture? Examples in the case of Oudtshoorn might include the closure of teachers' training colleges, the phasing out of arts education in many historically 'coloured' schools, the decommissioning of community-based cultural organisations, etc.

- How have the patterns of housing and transport provision in places like Oudtshoorn since 1994, even those geared towards poverty alleviation, inadvertently accentuated the existing patterns of social and cultural segregation, and what can be done to overcome their inhibiting factor on all forms of integrated public participation, including the arts?
- How can we avoid allowing the enduring imperative to overcome the disparities inherited at the end of the apartheid era to blind us to changes in the make-up of rural communities like Greater Oudtshoorn, new claims on inclusion and transformation, e.g., and the presence of immigrant role players and communities whose needs are seldom addressed in calls for redress along traditional lines?
- How might we overcome the gap between the sorts of work that artists working at the cutting edge of their art forms want to make and the sorts of work that festival audiences tend to want to see?

The management and board of the Absa KKNK reflect on challenges like these on an ongoing basis and we are committed to addressing them in strategic ways, in partnership with all role players who share our vision for an artistically vibrant, inclusive arts hub in the picturesque and poignant Klein Karoo.

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