

CIRCO  
STRADA

EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR  
CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS  
AND OUTDOOR ARTS

# SOUTH AFRICA

PERSPECTIVES FROM AN  
INTERNATIONAL FIELD TRIP



GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS 2024

# ABOUT CIRCOSTRADA & ARTCENA

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## **Circostrada**

Circostrada is the European Network for contemporary circus and outdoor arts. Created in 2003 with the core mission of furthering the development, empowerment and recognition of these fields at European and international levels, over the years the network has become an important anchoring point for its members and a key interlocutor in the dialogue with cultural policy makers across Europe. In a few words, Circostrada is:

- A community of contemporary circus and outdoor arts professionals linked together by common values and aspirations, who advocate for greater recognition and more structured cultural policies.
- The voice and reference network of contemporary circus and outdoor arts in Europe.
- A group of passionate and committed individuals who meet several times a year at the network's events.
- A network dedicated to its members, engaged in facilitating the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and good practices at European and international levels.
- A digital resource platform that provides thematic publications, observation tools and news on contemporary circus and outdoor arts, available to all free of charge in English and French.

[www.circostrada.org](http://www.circostrada.org)

## **ARTCENA**

ARTCENA is the National Center for Circus, Street and Theatre Arts, supported by the French Ministry of Culture. It coordinates Circostrada and is a permanent member of its steering committee. It works in close collaboration with professionals in the sector and offers them both publications and digital resources via its web platform. It also develops mentoring and training actions, tools and services to help them in their everyday practices. It supports contemporary creation through national support programs and encourages the international development of these three sectors.

[www.artcena.fr](http://www.artcena.fr)

# FOREWORDS

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Two of the key faultlines in the world are inequality and culture. Inequality with regard to who has economic, political, military, and cultural power and so are able to assert and project their interests, and culture referencing the different value and belief systems, different histories and lived experiences, different climates that inform the ways we construct meaning and identity for ourselves and in relation to others.

The arts are located within the realm of culture and are the means through which we interrogate, reflect, celebrate and project alternatives to our social realities. We make our art, and we collaborate not on an island nor in vacuums, but within a world in which we experience existential crises posed by violent conflicts, potential nuclear wars and devastating climate change. In a divided, polarised world, the future of humankind depends on the extent to which we know and understand each other, affirm and respect the humanity of the 'other', and commit and work towards a socially just order that is thus less prone to violence, that is more stable, more peaceful. These may be massive themes, but they provide the backdrop to and rationale for Circostrada's activity, Global Crossing, which this year had European members seeking to find, engage and network with their South African counterparts.

The exposure to the art forms and practices, the people and organisations who make the work and the socio-economic contexts that inform the content and aesthetics are enriching experiences in themselves.

But there is much more in these kinds of exchanges to feed the heart, the intellect and the imagination - the human encounters outside the formal engagements; the sights, the sounds, the tastes of a different world; the geography, climate and natural beauty of a faraway land and the experience of a country and its diverse people beyond the headlines.

Global Crossing South Africa was one such encounter in which the visitors and the visited engaged with each other against the backdrop of a vibrant, challenging reality that was both stimulating and deeply satisfying. Here's to more such encounters as modest but meaningful ripples in the direction of a more optimistic future, for us all.

## **Mike Van Graan**

Playwright and Producer

Curator of Global Crossing South Africa

Between March 14 and 22, 2024, a half dozen of Circostrada members had the opportunity to travel to South Africa for a week-long research trip to explore contemporary circus and outdoor arts, while gaining a better understanding of this ecosystem. Through key visits and meetings, in partnership with the Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative in the frame of My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival (Machadodorp), the Institute for Creative Arts and Zip Zap Circus (Cape Town), the French Institute of South Africa, the Human Rights Festival, and the Center for the Less Good Idea (Johannesburg), and with the ever so insightful and supportive curation of South African playwright and producer Mike Van Graan, the participants engaged with key actors in these sectors.

This international field trip was the third and last of a series of Global Crossing events in the framework of Circostrada's CS BODY/IES project, running from September 2021 until August 2024. This publication is designed to benefit members who did not get the chance to join this experience and, more broadly, all cultural professionals eager to learn more about the South African context of contemporary circus and outdoor arts. It provides a general historical context and shares points of view from key figures working in these sectors, allowing readers to understand the current issues South African actors are dealing with. This is not a scientific or exhaustive overview of contemporary circus and outdoor arts in South Africa, but an attempt to deliver an accurate report of the knowledge acquired by the network during a one-week research trip.

## **Stéphane Segreto-Aguilar**

Circostrada Network Coordinator

Head of International Development at ARTCENA

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# CREATIVE CHANGE: NAVIGATING SOUTH AFRICA'S PUBLIC SPACES

The histories of circus and outdoor arts in South Africa are deeply intertwined with the country's complex colonial and Apartheid past. While thirty years of democracy has brought newfound freedom of political and artistic expression, the intertwined legacies of spatial segregation and economic oppression have proved much harder to overturn. There are no outdoor arts without spatial politics; the accessibility and inclusivity of spaces impact who is available to perform as much as who is likely to attend.

© Carla Lever



By Dr. Carla Lever

Dr. Carla Lever is an honorary research fellow at the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies, University of Cape Town. Her work focuses on politics, spectacle and performance in a South African context. She designs and lectures a variety of courses on the connections between creativity and

social change, and has a forthcoming monograph with Amsterdam University Press on South African politics and performance from the street to the stage.

Despite this—and sometimes directly because of it—the outdoor arts continue to play a vital and vibrant role in remedying social fracture by re-imagining public space as a free zone of creative encounter. Overwhelmingly, then, contemporary outdoor arts in South Africa are aligned with forms of activism, challenging societal norms and reclaiming public spaces for marginalised voices.

### Formal Festival Programming

While annual arts festivals tend towards ticketed,

indoor events, several new attempts have been made to engage public spaces. The coastal city of Cape Town, for instance, plays host to two live art festivals that offer free performance and public art: Infecting the City (launched 2008), currently running as a biennale in alternation with the Institute for Creative Arts' Live Art Festival (launched 2012). Infecting the City, in particular, attempts to break the systemic barriers to arts access by using the streets as a stage, enabling potential moments of creative encounter for all residents in the midst of their regular urban activities.

Such festivals aren't the sole purview of large urban

centres. For instance, the My Body, My Space festival takes place in Emakhazeni, a municipality in rural Mpumalanga. Likewise, the small Karoo town of Barrydale comes alive every summer when Ukwanda and Handspring Puppet Companies host a giant puppet parade for children, culminating in an outdoor community performance.

### Monumental Embodiment

Apartheid laws may no longer prohibit urban integration, but in the absence of concerted urban planning efforts to desegregate cities and reduce the dynamic of a largely commuting Black workforce into previously ‘whites only’ urban centres means that public space remains a politically loaded zone of racial and class encounter. Consequently, the line between political art and artful politics blurs considerably. Indeed, some of the most powerful, affective and creative interventions in contemporary public spaces have, arguably, been performed by activists.

On 9 March 2015, University of Cape Town student Chumani Maxwele donned a hot pink plastic miner’s helmet and dramatically threw human excrement on a statue of Imperialist and mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. What began as a contestation of a single statue soon spread across the country—in time, across the global north, too. The resultant Rhodes Must Fall decolonial movement used a range of creative and defiant acts to advocate for transformative change beyond the academy, reshaping the politics of the public, and establishing a new, robust critical climate for outdoor arts.

Perhaps no surprise, then, that a range of performance artists have responded to this zeitgeist with a range of statue-adjacent public interventions. Performance artist Sathembile Msezane’s durational depiction of the Zimbabwean chapungu bird unfurling her wings as the statue of Rhodes was finally lifted from its plinth, became the iconic image of the movement. Likewise, artist Qondiswa James frequently uses the makeshift plinth of a crate to install herself dressed as various working class figures in public spaces, terming these cultural interventions that insist on elevating the present-day, labouring Black body as “hauntings” of “the archive in the present” (James, 2021; 26).

Increasingly, artists have been formally included in NGO activist strategies. Cape Town-based poet Mthuthuzeli Zimba (aka Blaze da poet), for instance, is often invited to bring his mobile artistic shack installation to enliven housing justice protests. And, in 2021, it was circus and outdoor art performers—particularly pole dancers, jugglers, high wire acts and musicians—that proved critical



Zip Zap Circus in Cape Town (South Africa) ©Mark Wessels

in amplifying a historic 60-day occupation movement by artists protesting mismanagement of Covid relief funds by the National Arts Council. Their sustained, rotational display outside the council’s offices was crucial in sparking public and press interest in the otherwise invisible stand taking place inside the buildings.

Indeed, so interwoven are the contemporary outdoor arts with social and spatial justice movements that activist education centre Tshisimani recently produced a freely-downloadable arts activism toolkit, detailing both the history of the approach in South Africa and simple ways organisations and individuals could scale up their mobilisation using creative methods and tactics. Likewise, a host of activities at the intersection of academia, arts and activism have sprung up: the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal’s annual Artfluence festival turns five in 2025, the Bertha Foundation recognises activists with annual awards, and the Tshwane University of Technology will host a dedicated activism conference in 2024.

### Border Zones and Creative Contestation

The wall is a persistent symbol of the Apartheid mentality of separation, where barriers both literal and legal were placed between racially grouped communities. No coincidence that some of the most enduring and vibrant public art is occurring within communities on wall space, where street art ranging from slogans to full visual manifestos mix the politics of the public and the private



Qondiswa James performing in 2023 during Reclaim the City protest march ©Carla Lever

in colourful contestations reflecting local and global histories of land claims, separation and resistance.

Of course, debates over who has a right to make their mark plays out a much-broader politics of space and belonging. Mural-centred annual art festivals like Sea Walls or IPAF regularly navigate the complex politics of public space in South Africa, eliciting both delight and mistrust as many communities express strong opinions about who can lay claim to represent their suburbs. A particularly long-standing altercation has existed for many years on the issue of Israeli artists being commissioned to paint murals in the historically Muslim neighbourhood of Salt River in Cape Town.

The contestation is understandable: artists can play a pivotal role in revitalising urban spaces. In July 2017, for instance, established artist James Delaney set out to clear a 40-acre park in the inner city of Johannesburg, using his own sculptures of every kind of animal to repopulate a deserted and dangerous area. Soon, 67 colourful metal owls were installed, one to mark every year Nelson Mandela gave in political service to his country. In time, they were joined by sculptural monkeys, ostriches, kudu buck, even a pangolin. The effort worked: The Wilds, as it has become known, is now a Blue Plaque heritage sight, and one of the most popular spaces of natural, creative and social encounter in the city. It's a remarkable testament to the possibilities of art to reconnect forcibly separated communities and long-forgotten nature, even in the concrete jungle.

## Circus Arts

If the outdoor arts in South Africa serve as a lens to examine South Africa's ongoing struggle for spatial justice, the history of circus arts in the country is one that speaks to its colonial entanglements. When it comes to tracing a more specific history of the circus arts in South Africa, though, it's important to identify which traditions we mean. After all, forms of dance, tumbling, storytelling, animal mimicry and outdoor community arts have deep histories, long predating the formation of the Republic and often unrelated to commercial exchange, or Western artistic frameworks.

The history of European, particularly British, influence in developing a circus tradition is a fascinating story of colonial aspirations and anxieties. A combination of touring nineteenth century European troupes and a contingent of migrant British performers drew crowds eager for daring spectacles, often centred on taming Africa's perceived 'wild' nature. In the same way as these performance repertoires were forming in South Africa, so, too, was the Republic itself. When the first European circus performers arrived, there were two British colonies, two Boer republics and several African chiefdoms. The Westernised formalisation of these arts can be read in parallel with the changing political dynamics, which spanned the Union and eventual formation of the independent Republic we know today.

Scholars (Uys, Mia, 2021; 2) contend that "amusement based on parades of trained animals and human tricks" had been staged since the second occupation of the Cape in 1806. Indeed, the first archival evidence of an application to "present a circus" was lodged in Cape Town as far back as 1810. Certainly, there are records of at least three touring European circuses in the early 1800s: an Italian circus, managed by 'Signor Severo' and 'Signor Della Case' in 1840s, the 'Olympic Circus', run by Mr Fouraux in the 1850s, and 'The Royal Standard Circus' of England in 1854. None of these remained in the country for an extended period, however, and most focussed on tight-rope walking, equestrian feats, clowning and gymnastics. Uys also notes that, during the nineteenth century, the circus was generally a rare space of racial diversity in South African towns, with segregation at early circuses initially based solely on seat pricing. Only from the 1900 do we find terms like 'native's gallery' being introduced to denote formalised segregation (Uys, 2021; 24).

Richard Bell's circus brought the large-scale European circus tradition to South Africa in the late 19th century. Bell's innovative approach included incorporating wild

animals, as evidenced by his 1880 newspaper ad seeking various exotic animals. Although Bell died of typhoid in 1881, his performer Frank Fillis took over and became famous for battle reenactments during the Anglo-Boer and World Wars. Fillis shifted the focus from equestrian acts to taming wild African animals, with zebras being introduced in 1932, often as disguised white horses. In 1911, Fillis' second wife, Eliza, recruited the Boswell Stage Circus from London. By 1913, the Boswell family established their own circus, dominating South African circus history for the next century.

Through the decades, the Boswells expanded their repertoire, acquiring exotic animals like Asian elephants and lions, and embarked on ambitious tours through Southern and Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia), Mozambique, and up into the Belgian Congo. They were particularly invested in social connection, offering charity performances during the Great Depression, welcoming racially mixed audiences during Apartheid, even donating a large marquee tent for rough sleepers to have shelter at night. However, economic challenges eventually took their toll, and in 2015 the by now-amalgamated Boswell-Wilkie Circus sold their famous Big Top to the McLaren Circus, who have continued as the only remaining touring circus in South Africa.

In Cape Town, the tension between spatial politics and outdoor arts plays out in a microcosm through the tale of two fixed-site circus schools, both with histories of engaging under-served communities of young people. The South African National Circus School was founded by trapeze artist and contortionist Dimitri Slaverse, partnering with the Sports and Recreation Department in the early 2000s with a medium-term lease in the bohemian suburb of Observatory. As funds tightened and the neighbourhood gentrified, weekly performances were reduced to bespoke training and public offerings. In 2015, the city refused to renew the circus' lease, claiming Slaverse had been allowing non-rent-paying performers a place to sleep in the clubhouse. While the circus closed down, a community of activists and former performers took over, turning the disused grounds into a vibrant community housing project with micro-enterprise and community gardening initiatives. In 2024, though, the decade-long process of eviction culminated in a final court order.

By contrast, barely 2 kilometers down the road, is the happier tale of Zip Zap Circus, the premier training ground for youth talent since its 1992 founding. From humble beginnings in Langa, Cape Town's oldest township, where a box of costumes was unpacked and a makeshift

trapeze hung from a tree, Zip Zap has grown to embrace a 'social circus' model, building relations of care among its participants that extend as far as its sister school in the USA. With its recent home fixed in a custom dome located in Cape Town's waterfront foreshore, Zip Zap offers eight free-to-access outreach training programmes, inducting young South Africans from all backgrounds into the circus arts. As co-founder Brent van Rensburg says, "In the circus, we do things that do not seem possible. We take risks to make something beautiful." With Covid-19 hitting the arts sector particularly hard, Zip Zap pivoted to film, producing "MOYA" ('spirit' in isiXhosa), an acrobatic art film blending various African dance forms like gumboot and pantsula with more traditional circus acts. Viewed to date in 42 countries, the award-winning film will be screened in various locations across France in late 2024.

While the outdoor arts have emerged as powerful platforms for activism and social engagement in South Africa, the circus arts have also evolved to reflect and respond to the country's complex sociopolitical dynamics. From Frank Fillis' carefully curated narratives of nature's wildness and Western taming, to contemporary artistic mediation through murals, legal lease battles and pop-up performances, the outdoor and circus arts in South Africa have a long history of responding to and reshaping the political climate. By examining their evolution and innovation, we gain deep insights into broader creative imaginings of spatial and social justice in South Africa's emergent democracy.



The South African National Circus in Cape Town during eviction consultations. ©Masixole Feni (Ground Up News)

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[Available online.](#)

# THE INTERVIEW CORNER: VOICES AND VIEWS FROM CULTURAL LEADERS AND ARTISTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

## INTERVIEW WITH LAURENCE ESTÈVE

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Laurence Estève co-founded the Zip Zap Circus School in Cape Town, South Africa, with her husband, Brent van Rensburg, in 1992, to foster social change through circus arts. This pioneering school teaches life skills and professional circus acts to children from all backgrounds at no cost. Laurence holds a Bachelor's in Sciences

and Technology of Physical & Sports Activities and a master's in Sports Institution Management from France. Her accolades include Knight of the National Order of Merit (2012) and Officer of the National Order of Merit (2024). As CEO of Zip Zap, she aims to elevate circus arts to the recognition of classical art forms.

### Could you share a bit about your individual backgrounds and shed light on the founding story of Zip Zap Circus?

Brent's journey into circus arts began with the first circus school in South Africa during the early 1970s, where he discovered his passion for the flying trapeze. Leaving South Africa in 1977, he embarked on a professional career with a flying trapeze act known as the Star Lords. I pursued an academic path in France, specialising in sports and development. Our paths converged in 1989 when we met in the Dominican Republic and discovered a shared love for youth and performing arts. Drawing from our diverse backgrounds, Brent's expertise in circus arts and my passion for social development, we envisioned Zip Zap Circus in 1992, Cape Town, South Africa. Our vision was simple, yet profound: to provide a safe space where young people from all backgrounds could unleash creativity, build confidence, and forge lifelong connections.

### What are the organisation's objectives, governance structure, and the principles that drive it forward?

We aim to inspire positive change. Zip Zap Circus aspires to be a small part of Nelson Mandela's dream of a Rainbow Nation. Our objectives are deeply rooted



Participants of the 2nd Chance programme in 2024, a hands-on circus workshop for high schoolers from underserved areas experience. © Amy Wood

in community empowerment, artistic excellence, and social inclusion, guided by five strategic pillars: creating a vibrant South African social circus, fostering a professional circus industry, showcasing the Zip Zap spirit internationally, nurturing the Zip Zap culture, securing the future of our organisation. Our governance structure emphasises transparency,

with values of accountability, respect, honesty, family, and joy upheld by management, staff, and partners. We strive to create an inclusive environment where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, whether through circus training programs, outreach initiatives, or artistic productions.

### **What is it like to run a social circus project in a city like Cape Town?**

Exciting! Cape Town's beauty is matched by its diversity of cultures and recognition on the international stage, yet it also faces many social challenges. We collaborate with local organisations dedicated to finding solutions. It is a challenge to navigate the distance from the circus world in Europe and America. Fundraising is a constant struggle, as Zip Zap has always provided free training for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. Despite the challenges, we've pioneered placing circus on the city's map and keeping the art form alive in South Africa.

and agents of change through collaboration, education, and advocacy. By forging partnerships with government agencies, cultural institutions, and grassroots organisations, it would be possible to expand access to circus education, promote diversity in the arts, and amplify the voices of marginalised communities.



Teambuilding exercise at the Zip Zap Academy, 2024. ©Amy Wood

### **From your perspective, what could be the next steps to take for creating a thriving ecosystem around circus arts in South Africa?**

The first step to create a thriving ecosystem around circus arts in South Africa would be, we believe, the creation of a bi-yearly international circus festival. Such an event would not only showcase contemporary circus arts to the public, but also benefit hospitality, entertainment, and local entrepreneurs, including informal businesses. We aim to celebrate circus artists as cultural ambassadors

# THE INTERVIEW CORNER: VOICES AND VIEWS FROM CULTURAL LEADERS AND ARTISTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

## INTERVIEW WITH SMANGALISO NGWENYA



Smangaliso Ngwenya is a multi-disciplinary artist, researcher, and founder of Isifiso SakaGogo Performance Theatre. He holds a Bachelor of Journalism and Media Studies from Rhodes University (2016) and a Master of Arts in Cultural Policy and Management from the University of the Witwatersrand (2020). He

has collaborated with the First Physical Theatre Company, Vuyani Dance Theatre, and The Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative. Ngwenya has choreographed seven works and directed three, including the award-winning *Ithemba*. Currently, he is focused on practice-led creative work and pursuing his PhD

**You are active as a dancer, choreographer, writer, performer, videographer, editor, while also having completed a Master of Arts in Cultural Policy and Management. How do all these practices intertwine in your professional life?**

There are multiple engagements needed in the cultural and creative industries in South Africa to cultivate a sustainable career. Sometimes, it probes you to not only engage with your artistic practice like, in my case, movement and dance as the actual practice of it but through multiple access points. This is where writing, choreography, videography, and editing play an integral role. All these mediums are engaged to better understand and engage with the medium of dance and movement - all my engagements are influenced and rooted in the foundations of movement and dance which I have gathered throughout my career.

My career as a mover and dancer and my engagement with companies like Vuyani Dance Theatre have made me want to better understand the industry in all aspects of the cultural value chain and understand the key players, processes, and foundations of each step of the

value chain. As a result, I studied for a Master of Arts in Cultural Policy and Management which provides a comprehensive and engaging overview of the cultural and creative industries touching on multiple aspects like fundamental and critical epistemologies of the discipline, including urban cultural governance, cultural economy, cultural entrepreneurship, arts management, audience development, arts marketing, community arts centres, cultural diplomacy and more. These now form an integral and pertinent part of my professional practice as an independent creative, researcher and scholar.

In conclusion, I always say to everyone I encounter that all aspects of who you are will make your practice and approaches unique and special. All these components of my professional and scholarly practice form pertinent parts of my professional life and my life as a whole.

**For the creation of *Barena... Re-imagined*, the performance showcased at the ninth edition of the My Body My Space festival, what sparked its inception?**

*Barena... Re-imagined* is an offering that originates from Vincent Mantsoe's *Barena* (1998). *Barena*<sup>1</sup>

1 'Barena' means 'chiefs' in English.

dives into questioning whether power is drawn from symbols/signifiers of power or is inherent in the ruler. Furthermore, it probes whether 'when one examines oneself, is humanity not the most important thing?' The work was reimagined by David April and this process was in celebration of Mantsoe and April's thirty years in the dance industry. The work originally premiered at the Kucheza dance festival in 2021 as a 30-minute reimagined piece, where I was gifted with an opportunity to embody the dance work under the leadership and artistic presence of April (choreographer of *Barena... Reimagined*) and Mantsoe (original choreographer of *Barena*), who now form a part of my creative and scholarly identity.

An integral aspect and initiator of the process was also to concretise a process where the archival works, legacies, and present practice of creatives, April and Mantsoe, continue to live on and become embodied, understood, and carried by younger generations like myself. Following this comprehensive background, history, and its current reimagined version, it was an honour to showcase the work at the ninth edition of the My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival. Nine years is, in itself, a huge milestone in the South African cultural and creative industries especially for an outdoor arts festival to successfully sustain itself in surviving the turbulent South African socio-economic and historic climate.

**This performance marks your fifth engagement at the My Body My Space festival. How did your relationship with the festival start?**

My relationship with the festival started in 2018 when I was a junior dancer at Vuyani Dance Theatre and I performed alongside Lulu Mlangeni, Standard Bank Young Artist award winner (2022), in a dance work which I scripted and performed called *Confined*. Following this engagement, in 2019 I performed in Roseline Wilken's *Cry the Beloved Eldorado Park*. On the brink of Covid-19, My Body My Space then became the first WhatsApp festival worldwide - I independently created *Glare* and *Home?* in 2021 which were both audiovisual screendance works created for the festival. In 2023, while working as an Education and Training Officer at The Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative (FATC) I premiered *Evelyn* in 2023. This year is my fifth engagement with My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival including the iteration online.



*Barena... Reimagined* during My Body My Space Festival in March 2024 © David April

**What significance does performing in an outdoor arts festival hold for you?**

It is invigorating to embody an offering in spaces that carries traces and remnants of where it originates. My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival provided a space for *Barena... Reimagined* to breathe in an open field encircled by community members from Machadodorp, artists, and generations with diverse and multiple lineages, identities, and chiefs that preceded them. Moments of African storytelling were ignited in a communal experience of creativity and a collective formation of each moment in its interactivity and configuration.

Outdoor festivals are essential for my practice as they provide an opportunity to embody a work for the foundation and essence of what it is without imposing technical additions and enhancements that can be found in enclosed theatre spaces - it commands the creator to connect with the work closely and for its fundamental existence, story and how it relates to spaces the initial story, theme or idea originally existed and continues to exist. Spaces such as homes, streets, a field, a body of water - the list is endless. Outdoor arts also call upon the artist to integrate themselves and the work into a space that carries with it so many layers - historically, socially, and communally and some spaces carry morphing significance to their immediate communities. The field on which I performed is a school field, but the natural environment, although gated, provided a reimagining of the world of a chief living on his land and addressing, celebrating, and living with the community.

The outdoor site and space influence all components of the work and, in so doing, ignite engagements with the subject matter or core of your work that would have not been found in other environments. It enhances, shifts, integrates, and inspires the work in different directions and spaces. I look forward to iterations of the work in varying outdoor engagement to realise how these may affect and/or infect the offering.



*Barena... Reimagined during My Body My Space Festival in March 2024 © David April*

# THE INTERVIEW CORNER: VOICES AND VIEWS FROM CULTURAL LEADERS AND ARTISTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

## INTERVIEW WITH JAY PATHER



Jay Pather is a choreographer, curator, and academic based in Cape Town (South Africa). He is a Professor and directs the Institute for Creative Arts at UCT University of Cape Town, curates *Infecting the City* Public Art Festival, and the ICA Live Art Festival. He curates for *Afrovibes* (Netherlands) and the *Biennale of Body, Image Movement* (Madrid).

He has co-curated for *Spielart* (Munich) and was Adjunct Curator for Performance at Zeitz MOCAA, in Cape Town. In 2019, he published *Transgressions, Live Art in South Africa* and chaired the jury for the International Award for Public Art. He was made *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Government.

### Can you tell us a little bit about the history, objectives, curatorial axes, and values of the *Infecting the City* festival?

The Festival was originally a performance festival on the Spier Wine Estate called the Spier Summer Festival. The estate is in Stellenbosch<sup>1</sup>, the audiences comprised in the main a largely elite, white audience. The owners of the estate wanted that festival to transform and engaged outside curators such as Brett Bailey and myself to look into changes. We suggested a Public Art festival and the name *Infecting the City* followed.

The goal at its inception was to make art accessible to all. Collaboration and community was encouraged and fostered in its early years. Subsequently, site-specificity began to be a prerequisite for participation as well. As a result, the festival grew into one attracting a destination based audience and literally people off the street, passer-by, shoppers, commuters. A strong curatorial point then began to be around how such a festival spoke on different registers, not only around language, but also form, points of reference and concept. In recent years, the festival, sometimes comprising around 40 productions, boasts a giddy selection of form from

conceptual work, to classics that are restaged and speak to site, to projects that work with more popular elements. Another curatorial intervention has been the introduction of an ambulatory format for spectatorship - audiences are led from one work to another on a route comprising around five works. These works talk to each other thematically, as well as allows for embedding a rhythm of concept, form as well as access, so a more conceptual work may be followed by something that is widely accessible incorporating popular forms, to a work that builds on audience participation, allowing for a dynamism in the experience of the festival.

### Your festival takes place in the Business District of Cape Town. Could you share some insights into the process of showcasing outdoor arts in such a context?

Cape Town was - and in many respects is - the ideal apartheid city. During apartheid, a cartography of separation was set up. The centre was almost entirely white owned and run, and townships were (and are) very far away. As a result, Black people commute long distances to get to work and have to leave early enough to catch transport to make the long journey

<sup>1</sup> A town in the Western Cape province of South Africa, situated about 50 kilometres east of Cape Town.

back. The central business district then becomes a rich (though contested) terrain for an 'infection' of art by predominantly Black artists. This does require a great deal of work in terms of acquiring permissions, and so on, and the City is run by a dominant white party - the Democratic alliance. The protection of the 'proper' way to do things persists, and we have to work exceptionally hard to make things happen that feel natural and dynamic while working with tight restrictions. The City has of late become more supportive, even contributing around 12% of the expenditure.

**What kind of new developments or aesthetics trends have you observed over the last ten years for outdoor arts performances in South Africa?**

A great deal more audience participation, collaboration and work that considers ecology and the environment. An increasing amount of activist work and also works that have been drawn to aesthetics of beauty, wonder and desire, that dream optimistically about exuberance and better futures.

**How do you see the festival ten years from now? What do you think will be the main opportunities and challenges?**

I think that public art is temporal; especially in a transforming society (one can well ask which society isn't?) that is challenging more and more the notion of the permanent concrete sculpture as public art. Temporality gives work a chance to be specific, to read the times and reflect on these times, to work dynamically with increasingly complex and complicated audiences, to work provocatively and gauge the extent and level of provocation. Ultimately to work as an empathetic mirror that sees, witnesses, acknowledges, and assuages the private consciousness in the public sphere and in the moment. This encounter has the capacity to cut through the alarming alienation initiated and now exacerbated by late capitalism and materialism. I trust that these trends continue and public art stays close to its purpose of being part of the public and not succumbing to the agendas of neoliberal designs on how audiences should be controlled and extracted from for profit and material gain.

## THE INTERVIEW CORNER: VOICES AND VIEWS FROM CULTURAL LEADERS AND ARTISTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

### INTERVIEW WITH PJ SABBAGHA, CO-AUTHORED WITH TSHEGO KHUTSOANE<sup>1</sup>



PJ Sabbagha is a South African choreographer and arts activist, committed to issue-based dance theatre and various arts-engaging social justice endeavours. Sabbagha is the founding member and Managing and Artistic Director of The Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative (now in its 29th year), the

Ebhudlweni Arts Center, and the annual My Body My Space Rural Public Arts Festival.

**My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival has just celebrated its ninth edition. Can you tell us a little bit about the history, objectives, curatorial axes, and values of this festival?**

The festival concept came out of a collaborative brainstorm Athena Mazarakis<sup>2</sup> and I had with Alba Letts, who was the Director of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Services for the city of Johannesburg at the time. We dreamed up and developed a strong concept that leaned into the “Corridors Of Freedom” (COF) project that was designed to transform the entrenched group areas settlement patterns that moved the majority of South Africans into significantly disadvantaged lived realities on the outskirts of cities. There was a newly introduced bus system called “Rea vaya”<sup>3</sup> which is the transit-oriented development strategy of the COF project’s transformation agenda. The bus network’s routes connects the south-western township (Soweto) clusters to the city centre and suburbs. In our thinking at the time, we were looking to leverage the newly implemented Johannesburg bus service - the

name of which evokes action, change, movement, and progress. We imagined that the festival would align with the vision to dismantle apartheid’s legacy of segregation by promoting freedom of movement and economic empowerment, especially for historically marginalised communities, by placing free and accessible art in the spaces, places and stops of the Rea vaya routes. From this brainstorming process, we drafted a proposal, began to look for funding and eventually secured public arts funding from the Department of Sport Arts and Culture (DSAC) Mzansi Golden Economy Fund (MGE). The DSAC MGE fund was established in 2012 to stimulate economic growth and employment opportunities in the country, and our project design fit right into their mandate. When our collaborator-in-brainstorming, shifted roles to Head of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Services in Ekurhuleni, the project shifted its implementation plan from Johannesburg to Ekurhuleni along with her. We then made adjustments to the project’s design due to the absence of a Rea Vaya bus network in Ekurhuleni. The 2015 inaugural My Body My Space: Public Arts

1 Tshego Khutsoane is the Development Manager of the Forgotten Angle Theatre Collaborative.  
2 Athena Mazarakis is a South African choreographer, performer, somatic arts educator, arts manager and a Momenteur of the SO Acamedy for The Centre for the Less Good Idea in Johannesburg.  
3 ‘We are moving’ in English.

Festival marked the final event held by FATC in Gauteng before we packed up and moved all of our operations to Emakhazeni.

The success of the first festival prompted a deeper exploration of the My Body My Space concept which, in our evolving has come to emphasises collaboration and partnership within the arts sector despite limited financial resources. The festival's ethos revolves around fostering community engagement, artistic collaboration, and celebration, steering the producing of the festival in the direction of uplifting the marginal communities and identities, and prioritising inclusivity and shared experiences.

With a focus on human rights, the festival typically coincides with Human Rights Month in South Africa, aligning with themes of freedom and social justice. Instances where the festival deviated from this schedule include the Freedom Month celebration in 2019 and a themed festival addressing the #metoo movement through a curated #wetoo concept by artist Jennifer Ferguson.

The project's political agenda centres on challenging oppressive systems that restrict individuals' autonomy and freedom. Aesthetically, the project aims for a non-violent disruption of established norms and power structures.

At our heart we want to provide individuals with opportunities to explore new spaces in themselves and their lived environments, and to engage with these internal and external landscapes in previously unexplored ways.

**Your festival actively engages with the local community of the Emakhazeni Local Municipality in rural Mpumalanga. Could you share insights into the process of collaborating with local citizens and the principles that guide this work?**

Our organisation and the festival's primary focus is on young people, particularly children, and local young artists – they are our central community.

Our next target community involves the municipality local to us, including its structures, systems, and facilities. The fundamental attitude guiding this interaction is to align with their objectives to mobilise efforts, resources, and enthusiasm. In our years of collaboration that has translated into infrastructural support and improvements to the local environment. Historically, this has brought about maintenance actions to sites and roads, and the unlocking of specialised emergency and public



My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival in Mpumalanga  
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safety services in ways aimed at facilitating benefits for local artists and visiting patrons. We approach this collaboration with the symbiotic outlook to make each other look good.

Despite potential limitations in dance-centric funding, our intention is to explore strategies that encompass a bigger scope.

In the past, our funding was not tied to specific artistic disciplines, and this enabled us to involve various community members beyond dance. In this more open structure we were able to partner with a broad spectrum of local businesses, food vendors and crafters, in ways that widened the festival's benefit reach and impact. This question is making us note what engagement processes have fallen away. A town meetings community engagement model we had in place in 2015 is definitely something that we could adapt and return to. This approach helped us to establish some partnerships that we have sustained up to now, and it would be very beneficial to re-engage with it to connect a wider net of central and peripheral locals on how they can leverage the festival for their benefit and dream into the collective potential from there.

**What kind of new developments or aesthetics trends have you observed over the last ten years for outdoor arts performances in South Africa?**

With the exception of Infecting the city festival<sup>4</sup>, which

4 Infecting The City (ITC) is a bi-annual public arts festival that takes place in the City of Cape Town.

is the kind of large institutionalised festival of work in outdoor spaces in South Africa, many other activities have dwindled in the institutional frame, but become ignited in the community/township frame. This shift is partly due to the challenges posed to providing technical support in unconventional spaces outside the controlled environment of a theatre. Challenges also arise around ticketing and revenue generation for performances in public spaces, as it is typically challenging to monetise such events without containment measures in place.

An increasing number of community-based artists are embracing this approach due to limited resources and infrastructure in their living/working environments. It is also clear that working in this way builds audiences and attracts new people, and cultivates a sense of place and value within communities.

In terms of aesthetics, there is very little fee-paying and commission-based opportunity within the outdoor performance space in our South African context. Without a financial system and solid structures to support, artistic aesthetic development remains

**collaborations (within the African continent, and also with Europe) and make them as sustainable as possible for a festival such as My Body My Space?**

The prevalent challenge persists in financial constraints, which is a common issue we see across various sectors, and particularly in international funding, where the concept of matching contributions prevails. This model of organisations pledging support in proportion to the contributions received is ill-placed.

Within our continent, financial limitations persist, barring notable international, who are capable of bearing more significant personal costs and making substantial contributions compared to the average artist or organisation. The African continent grapples with pressing issues and fundamental disparities that emphasise a critical need for change.

To establish a more sustainable relationship, a European perspective should advocate for enhancing available resources. Although mirroring European contributions may be unrealistic, valuable non-financial assets like space and access to networks could markedly influence the Africa-Europe relational dynamic. The idea of a 50/50 agreement is simply impractical and unjust due to inherent discrepancies in starting points between the regions.

Sharp contrasts emerge, for instance, when comparing European artist expenses with the operational costs of organisations in our context. While some European artists' monthly earnings may equal our annual earnings, this doesn't necessarily translate to significantly higher monthly expenses. These divergent financial capacities underscore the urgent necessity for a more generous exchange of resources, knowledge, information, and skills.

So to nurture enduring relationships, a shift towards a more equitable resource-sharing approach is essential. African artists aspire to be recognised for their unique perspectives, not solely as representatives of a continent, but as equals enriching the artistic landscape. Discrepancies in collaborative efforts between European and African entities often arise from misaligned agendas, that jeopardise potential partnerships at their inception. Initiatives that hinge on a deliberate commitment to defining roles and expectations clearly, fostering an environment where all parties flourish through knowledge sharing, shared experiences, and expertise is more likely to establish long-term partnerships. As long as artists are fundamentally viewed and feel like equals in these engagements, mutual respect and equitable contributions will cultivate lasting relationships.



**My Body My Space: Public Arts Festival in Mpumalanga**  
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significantly limited if not stagnant. People instead are making work and opting to present it either inside or outside. Because of this artistic evolution, the only ways that the aesthetic seems to be shifting, growing, and moving is through the passion and interest of the individual artist.

**In your opinion, what would be the main challenges to keep nurturing international**

# THE INTERVIEW CORNER: VOICES AND VIEWS FROM CULTURAL LEADERS AND ARTISTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA

## INTERVIEW WITH ORLANDO VARGAS & MICHELLE FOK



The Cirk is an entertainment and performance company, based in Johannesburg (South Africa), dedicated to sharing the love of circus arts. Their team boasts an extensive repertoire of specialty aerial and ground acts, thoughtfully constructed for both standalone shows and corporate events. At the Cirk, the goal is to inspire

creative expression and art in its many forms through circus. As one of the few circus entertainment companies in South Africa, they pride themselves on creating an ecosystem where artists can collaborate and create shows on the continent.

### Could you share a bit about your individual backgrounds and shed light on the founding story of The Cirk?

The Cirk was established in 2018, and is a manifestation of a devoted team's passion for circus arts. Our five founders come from diverse backgrounds and walks of life, but we are all united by circus and were rallied together by a desire to bring the magic that we experienced to local and international audiences. The journey began as a dream to inspire and has grown into an esteemed entertainment company with a commitment for excellence. Each member of our founding team contributes unique skills, knowledge, and expertise to the company.

Orlando Enrique Vargas Riveros, a professional circus artist with 20 years' experience and formal training from Circo Del Mundo in Chile, has performed globally and moved to South Africa in 2006. At The Cirk, Orlando oversees management, handles technical venue requirements, and ensures successful client service delivery by matching client needs with team strengths. Marco Antonio Vargas Riveros was introduced to circus training at age six and enrolled at Circo Del Mundo at thirteen, specialising in Acrobatics and Chinese pole. In 2009, he moved to South Africa to train full-time and has since travelled across Africa

and the Middle East, gaining extensive expertise. Marco's event organisation experience and cultural curiosity, help him build strong rapport within The Cirk community. Michelle Fok is a graduate with degrees in Architecture and Public Health. She has always had an active lifestyle, participating in various dance disciplines, pilates, and circus training. At The Cirk, Michelle uses her academic background and organisational skills to ensure smooth operations and effective administrative systems. Polish-born Joanna Pawelczyk, a versatile pole fitness trainer and performer, has competed and trained internationally. As a photography graduate, she designs all the graphic and marketing materials for The Cirk. She also manages the Professional Training Program, ensuring high-quality performers and choreographing captivating acts. Carl Isernhike, with a background as a derivatives and quantitative analyst, has built a strong profile in asset management and investment portfolio management. Seeking an escape from finance, Carl is an accomplished aerialist specializing in trapeze, performing locally and internationally. At The Cirk, he leverages his finance expertise to establish processes that meet the interests of artists, students, and clients.

This blend of diverse talents and a shared vision has been the cornerstone of our success, enabling the company to grow and thrive within the South African

environment.

**What are the company's objectives, governance structure, and the creative processes that drive it forward?**

At The Cirk, our primary objective is to inspire creative expression and art in its many forms, delivering unforgettable and unique circus experiences, as well as making it accessible to its audience.

Our governance structure fosters collaboration and innovation, maximising each team member's strengths. We operate with a flat hierarchy that encourages open communication and creative freedom, ensuring decisions are made democratically.

Our creative process is a dynamic blend of in-house production capabilities and collaborations with both local and international talents. This allows us to continually push the boundaries of creativity and innovation. Our productions range from enchanting depictions of magical lands to thrilling acrobatic performances and burlesque shows, catering to a wide audience.

**Balancing artistic innovation with mainstream appeal may be challenging sometimes. How does your company navigate this delicate equilibrium?**

Balancing artistic innovation with mainstream appeal presents a significant challenge, particularly in South Africa, where circus arts may not be widely recognised. Survival in this country often necessitates maintaining a mainstream presence.

Our strategy entails a dedicated focus on delivering visually striking and emotionally resonant performances that engage a diverse audience. We achieve this by continuously pushing creative boundaries while remaining attentive to audience preferences and feedback. This delicate balance is achieved through comprehensive research, active audience engagement, and a nuanced understanding of the cultural landscape in which we operate.

**From your perspective, what could be the next steps to take for creating a thriving ecosystem around circus arts in South Africa?**

In South Africa, government support for the arts is limited, and resources are often directed towards addressing pressing social and economic issues. Consequently, the arts, including circus arts, are not always a priority. This lack of support can pose challenges for the development and sustainability of



Class at the Cirk's venue © thecirk.com

artistic endeavours.

Within the specific context of circus arts, the industry is still in its infancy in South Africa, with only a few organisations actively involved in promoting and practising circus arts. This limited presence makes it essential to take strategic steps to nurture and grow the circus arts scene in the country.

Firstly, there is a need to establish holistic systems that support artists throughout their career journey. This includes providing training programs, mentorship opportunities, and platforms for artists to showcase their talents. By creating a supportive environment for artists, we can ensure a steady supply of skilled performers as well as facilities to integrate into circus productions.

Secondly, fostering international partnerships can bring valuable resources, expertise, and exposure to the South African circus arts scene. Collaborations with organisations from other countries can provide opportunities for knowledge exchange, joint productions, and international touring, thereby expanding the reach and impact of circus arts in South Africa.

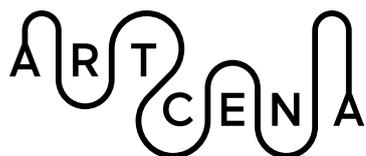
By addressing these challenges and taking proactive steps to support and promote circus arts, we can create a thriving ecosystem that celebrates creativity, fosters artistic expression, and enriches the cultural landscape of South Africa.





**EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR  
CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS  
AND OUTDOOR ARTS**

Circostrada is the European Network for contemporary circus and outdoor arts. Created in 2003 with the core mission of furthering the development, empowerment and recognition of these fields at European and international levels, over the years the network has become an important anchoring point for its members - 162 organisations from over 40 countries - and a key interlocutor in the dialogue with cultural policy makers across Europe.



ARTCENA is the National Center for Circus, Street and Theatre Arts, supported by the French Ministry of Culture. It coordinates Circostrada and is a permanent member of its steering committee. It works in close collaboration with professionals in the sector and offers them both publications and digital resources via its web platform. It also develops mentoring and training actions, tools and services to help them in their everyday practices. It supports contemporary creation through national support programs and encourages the international development of these three sectors.



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