

South Africa: National Arts Festival

The National Arts Festival, now in its 37th year, has proved its sustainability and has grown to be one of the leading arts festivals in southern Africa. Held in Grahamstown its objectives are to deliver excellence; encourage innovation and development in the arts by providing a platform for both established and emerging South African artists; create opportunities for collaboration with international artists; and build new audiences.



This year the organizers reported year-on-year growth on attendance of 8.47%, with total attendance at Festival events in 2010 reaching 185 776.

Reporting the figures, Festival CEO Tony Lankester said that the Festival was pleased with attendance. “We’ve shown that our artists can hold their own at a time when audience attention is being fragmented and distraction levels are high. The FIFA World Cup is a massive event and South Africa is doing a great job getting behind it. The Festival has managed to draw on that national pride and stage work that delivered the World Cup of the Arts,” he said.

The increase in attendance was driven largely, Lankester said, by a strong Street Theatre lineup, and over 50 exhibitions on both the Main and Fringe programme.

“Audiences were definitely looking for something different this year. They gravitated to some of the Street Theatre work that captured their attention,” he said. The free Festival finale performance of *Angeli e Demoni*, for example, attracted about 2000 audience members, making it one of the biggest Festival performances ever.



“Audiences were seeking out quality this year. They relied heavily on reputation and word of mouth in making their choices. This saw some productions dominate at the box office,” Lankester said.

About 35 productions had sold-out performances, including *London Road*, *Carmen*, *Judith Sephuma*, *Telling Lies*, *Dekaf*, *The Girl in the Yellow Dress*, *Inscrutable*, *Tree Boy*, *Karoo Moose*, *Hats*, *Cinema* and *Swan Lake*.

“In years to come, theatre practitioners need to take the lead from those who did well this year by producing work that is compelling, remarkable, different and powerful,” Lankester said.

“Audiences are being more careful when booking shows, and are opting for freshness, quality and innovation over tried-and-tested work that they may have already seen at previous festivals. While Stand-up Comedy is still strong on the Fringe, there was an increase in the level of buzz around Theatre and Physical Theatre work, which also flowed through to the box office,” he said.

This heightened level of discernment among audiences, combined with the dominance of a few exceptionally strong productions, and the renewed interest in highly creative and visually exciting outdoor work, saw Fringe ‘market share’ during the Festival drop by about 10%.

“This isn’t anything to be alarmed about,” Lankester said. “It might just be a necessary correction on the back of sharp Fringe growth in recent years, as well as a response to the recession.”

The introduction of the Standard Bank Ovation Awards this year added a new dimension to festival-goers’ experience, with 36 Fringe productions receiving the award during the course of the Festival. On the final day, 5 Gold Ovation, 8 Silver Ovation and two special Ovation awards were announced. “The awards definitely guided audiences towards certain productions,” Lankester said. “Having a

badge of quality instills some confidence among audiences and helps them make choices when confronted by a programme listing 350 Fringe productions.”

Standard Bank Ovation Award winners were reflected in the list of top grossing shows on the Fringe. The biggest grossing comedy show was Raiders of the Lost Aardvark, while London Road topped the list for Theatre, closely followed by Breed, and Stilted for Physical Theatre.

Organisers this year extended the Festival to 15 days from its usual 10 days, a move which Lankester says paid off. “We wanted to send a clear message that our artists, directors, writers and performers could rise to the challenge of producing great work that makes South Africa proud. I think they did that. Producing a Festival of this scale for an extended period was always going to be a gamble but by doing so we gave South Africans the opportunity to juggle their World Cup schedules with a trip to Grahamstown. The other advantage was the heightened international media attention - we had coverage in newspapers and on TV and Radio from around the world that was largely on the back of the World Cup, which was great for our artists.”



Apart from the media, some 22 countries were represented on the Festival programme and significant numbers of international visitors to the Eastern Cape came through to Grahamstown for short bursts during the Festival. “All of those visitors - media, performers and audiences - not only bought tickets to shows, but they drank in pubs and ate in the restaurants of Grahamstown, bought craftwork as souvenirs, and left with promises to return,” Lankester said.

“Some local media passed comment that the streets of Grahamstown seemed quiet, some even going so far as to say that the Festival had suffered at the hands of the World Cup. Those critics clearly didn’t try and buy tickets for any of the dozens of sold out shows, or attend any of the massive street theatre performances. The success of an arts festival should not be determined by the shallow measure of how busy the streets are, but rather on the quality and diversity of the art, and by the size of the audience engaging with the art,” Lankester said. “Inevitably spreading a 10-day audience over 15 days was going to result in slightly quieter periods. But if we had taken a decision to stick to 10 days on the advice of the cynics, we would have been letting down artists who expect us to be bold, and to provide them with the opportunity to work.”

“All in all we enjoyed this year and are happy with the way it worked out - and we’ve already begun our planning for next year,” Lankester said.



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