

In 2020, the Toyota US Woordfees was the only one of the big six Afrikaans art festivals that could take place as planned. Due to the ongoing pandemic, the Woordfees, like other festivals, had to devise plans to keep their brand alive, meet obligations to sponsors and also support artists, writes Saartjie Botha.

When President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the first lockdown measures on 15 March last year that made it impossible to stage any arts festival in its traditional format, the traditional closing performance of the 21st Woordfees had just begun. Artists who were still in town gathered in the foyer of the Adam Small Theatre Complex at Stellenbosch University (SU), uncertain and worried about what lay ahead.

The Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) 2020 had already been cancelled prior to the president's announcement on 14 March. This was followed by Innibos as well as the Free State Festival and Aardklop. The Suidoosterfees was initially postponed by six months to September and finally took place in a hybrid model in November 2020, offering, among other things, "drive-in theatre". On the international front, all major festivals were cancelled. More than a year later, our industry is on the verge of collapsing.

In South Africa, arts festivals' financial models are based, in part at least, on ticket sales. To be able to sell large volumes of tickets, festivals have a main stage or site area where thousands of visitors gather to have a good time. The exceptions are the Suidoosterfees, which is presented in the Artscape Theatre Centre, and the Toyota US Woordfees, which does not have a site and stall component. The Woordfees does present Woordfees WOW Carnival and at least one other large outdoor concert with a capacity limit of approximately 6 000 annually. During the various levels of the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the adjusted capacity would have ranged from zero to 500, which would have sunk the financial feasibility of such an enterprise even before the first production had been staged.

In terms of indoor spaces, the picture is even gloomier: a space such as the Adam Small Auditorium, with a capacity of 324, can only accommodate an audience of 49 with social distancing. To generate the same revenue from a sold-out show as before COVID-19, tickets with reduced capacity would have to cost more than R990 each. Revenues from commercial sponsorships, philanthropic donations and other revenue streams have inevitably declined due to the pandemic, putting further strain on the sustainability of festivals.

On World Creativity and Innovation Day (21 April), it must be emphasised once again that festivals not only contribute to social impact and cohesion in South Africa, but also play a decisive role in the sustainability of the larger performing arts industry. For our artist community, the pandemic has not only been accompanied by a dramatic loss of jobs and income, but has also brought about a forced separation of the stage spaces that feed their creativity.

Closed theatres and cancelled art festivals deprived artists of the seasonal patterns that determine their life rhythms and provide a degree of peace of mind in an industry in which uncertainty is a given even in good years. Physical lockdown therefore took both a financial and a psychological toll. The isolation and separation of fellow artists has reinforced feelings of worry and powerlessness and made many artists feel homeless and distressed.

Some artists have been able to move their performing work online with varying degrees of success, but for the vast majority of the artist community, it has not been a viable alternative. Meanwhile, it has also become evident that online performances and presentations do not offer a satisfactory, sustainable solution.

Since the announcement of the lockdown, the Woordfees team has been exploring various alternative models to contribute to our beleaguered artist community: a theater writing laboratory led by Janice Honeyman was presented during which twelve new texts were developed, and some existing plays were filmed in the Baxter Theater Complex thanks to kykNET and in collaboration with March Media. The most ambitious effort so far has been the recent Toyota US Woordfees Artists' Week and the "Flikker & Flash" pop-up shows.

This Artists' Week wanted to create a community for artists in which they could regain a sense of self-worth and confidence in their skills and also develop and try out new ideas. The aim was to encourage innovative thinking, stimulate creativity and give participants the chance to recharge. The week was attended by almost 70 artists from across South Africa and consisted of a series of workshops, creative projects and opportunities for self-examination and reflection, presented by eight facilitators selected from a broad spectrum of the South African art community. Strict COVID protocols were adhered to during the week.

During this week, artists had to develop a project concept in collaboration with the other participants. Within the span of just four days, concepts had to be refined into vignettes and mini-shows with little technical support and virtually no budget, but they did have access to the Woordfees wardrobe and set store. The final destination for the mini-shows wasn't a safe and conventional theatre space, but eleven empty shops and commercial properties in the Stellenbosch town centre. With Flikker & Flash, the Woordfees wanted to breathe new life into a town that had been hit hard by the pandemic and the associated loss of purchasing power and tourism.

Artists could decide for themselves about the setting up and utilisation of the unconventional theatre spaces where they had to perform. Some allowed a limited number of audience members within the performance space; others preferred a combination of audience members inside the space and also outside on the sidewalk, while other artists were inside the performance space and separated from the audience by a glass window, with sound amplification on sidewalks. Initially, it had been planned that performances would take place every hour, but the long queues and great demand meant that artists tried to fit in as many performances as possible. Admission to the shows was free, but audience members could make a donation to the artists or contribute to the Tribuo Fund, which provides financial support to artists and other collaborators in the performing arts industry.

The performance spaces were close enough to each other that audiences could walk comfortably between performances, and with good planning and a bit of luck be able to attend all 16 performances – almost like the annual "Vensters" at SU. The noise and excitement in the streets of Stellenbosch exceeded our wildest expectations. Flikker & Flash wanted to put artists at the centre and bring together artists and audiences on a small scale. Suddenly there was a connection and with the connection there was energy – that much-needed catalyst for tourism that festivals bring to host towns.

Meanwhile, the larger arts industry has been turned upside down due to a lack of artistic vision, industry knowledge and leadership at government level. If ever there was a time for artists to take ownership of the industry, it is now. The Woordfees is happy to offer our available platforms and work with partners. Even if it was only for a weekend, Flikker & Flash was able to provide relief from the extreme pressure that our industry is currently experiencing.

Without the generous support of our sponsors, Toyota, SU, kykNET and NATi (National Afrikaans Theatre Initiative), the Woordfees Artists' Week would not have been possible. Thanks to the support of Visit Stellenbosch, artists from outside Stellenbosch were able to enjoy a comfortable stay in local guest houses and experience Boland hospitality in local restaurants.

Decisions on what the Toyota SU Woordfees' activities will look like for the rest of 2021 and 2022, will be taken and communicated within the next few weeks. This will be taken in consultation with industry role players, sponsors, the Stellenbosch community and our advisory board. Our nature and essence are art and culture and a celebration thereof: without a programme we are nothing. However, we can only host a festival if we can ensure the safety of participants and festival goers, and hosting such a festival is also financially feasible.

***Saartjie Botha is the director of the Toyota US Woordfees and WOW.**