

Category is: Emperors and Activists

'Supposing an emperor was persuaded to wear a new suit of clothes whose material was so fine that, to the common eye, the clothes weren't there. And suppose a little boy pointed out this fact in a loud, clear voice... Then you have THE STORY OF THE EMPEROR WHO HAD NO CLOTHES. But if you knew a bit more, it would be THE STORY OF THE BOY WHO GOT A WELL-DESERVED THRASHING FROM HIS DAD FOR BEING RUDE TO ROYALTY AND WAS LOCKED UP. Or THE STORY OF THE WHOLE CROWD WHO WERE ROUNDED UP BY THE GUARDS AND TOLD "THIS DIDN'T HAPPEN, OK? DOES ANYONE WANT TO ARGUE?" ... It all depends on how much you know...' – Terry Pratchett

For some reason, Danish author Hans Christian Anderson's 1837 fable *The Emperor's New Clothes* has been on my mind a lot lately... and I've been trying to figure out why... Perhaps it's the lingering echo of 16-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg castigating the assembly of world leaders who gathered for the 2019 United Nations Climate Change conference with her repeated and incrementally emotional 'How dare you?'. Or perhaps, closer to home, the way in which the CEO and CFO of an iconic South African theatre institution didn't shy away from speaking truth to power when a range of scandalous but unfounded allegations, ranging from financial misconduct to racism and nepotism, were levelled at them. Standing up to that kind of bullying takes some guts but their courage paid off and they were exonerated.

How people are elected, appointed, or by happenstance find their way into positions of power, is perhaps the topic for the column of a future issue. But whatever your point of view on the subject, I reckon the adage by Marvel Cinematic Universe's Uncle Ben Parker holds universally true: 'With great power comes great responsibility.' As the only executive on a board of non-executive directors, navigating the space between 'doing things right' and 'doing the right things' still occasionally perplexes me. Look, I am by no means claiming any sort of superpower merely by virtue of being a CEO, but I do feel very strongly that having worked in



Ashraf Johaardien at the 22nd annual BASA Awards PHOTOS Theana Breugem

the creative sector for more than two decades has earned me some relatively unique stripes and insights – and therefore the right to very specific opinions on certain subjects. For example, I strongly believe that when it comes to aviation awards, only pilots are truly qualified to judge other pilots in the category of 'Flying an Aeroplane'. In my view, passengers who know nothing of aeronautics are better suited to judging the quality of the coffee or the friendliness of the cabin crew serving hot beverages. Just because you're a frequent flyer should not qualify you for a seat on any kind of aviation adjudication panel... or indeed column inches reserved for an appropriately qualified critic of the craft of flying.

I recently served on the adjudication panel of the Arts & Culture Trust's (ACT) Performing Arts Scholarships Competition, which this year awarded five R50 000 scholarships to winners in the categories of 'Musical Theatre', 'Singing', 'Dancing', 'Acting' and 'Visual Arts'



with the support of DALRO and Nedbank Arts Affinities. I can confirm that all of the winners were indeed worthy and deserving recipients – but equally, so were many of the runners-up. Who was finally awarded the shining cash prize came down to the judges' collective interpretation of the role, purpose and intention of this particular scholarships platform.

As I mentioned in my last column, I have been connected with a broad spectrum of awards for longer than I really care to admit. In 2002, I won the inaugural Spier/PANSA (Performing Arts Network of South Africa) Award for my play *Salaam Stories*. From 2005 to 2010, I produced the annual ACT Awards. From 2008 to 2010, I produced the ACT Performing Arts Scholarships. From 2011 to 2015, I produced the University of Johannesburg's UJ CAN YOU DANCE/SING/ACT/SLAM talent search competition across the four campuses which service UJ's 50 000 students. From 2015 to 2018, I produced the Standard Bank Young Artist Awards, the Standard Bank Ovation Awards and the Cape Town Fringe Fresh Awards. So, my point is, I might just know a thing or two about arts awards. And one of those things is this: the winners are always deserving. But often, so too are the finalists. Who walks away with a trophy, in the end, is sometimes just as much about a particular awards process or system as it is about any of the contenders.

And so, to the winners of the 22nd annual BASA Awards partnered by Hollard who are showcased on pages 14 to 23 of this issue, I extend my wholehearted and unmitigated congratulations. To the finalists who narrowly missed going home with Ralph Borland's beautifully designed and cleverly crafted TOK.TOKKIE 1.0 automaton trophy, know that just being named a finalist is also an enormous accomplishment. So please keep doing what you do – because next time it will be your turn... I promise. Until then, just stay true to you and keep doing what you do...

FUN FACT: Thirty-year-old Palesa Mbali Litha, BASA's recently appointed Research Assistant, knows a lot about aviation. In fact, she flies planes. Palesa is in the process of accumulating the requisite three licenses required to be an ATPL pilot (she already has two of them!).



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