

TRIBAL INSTINCTS

and Weakest Links

‘We spend so much energy and breath trying to be accepted in tribes that are not in our “soul DNA”. Learn to walk away from a table that has no seat reserved for you. Align, go with your flow and the rhythm of synchronicity will lead you to your tribe.’ – Malebo Sephodi

All tribes have rules and rituals. Some are homogenous in that members look, dress and behave the same. Others are more diverse and membership may vary. But there are always rules and rituals that must be obeyed at all costs. That’s how tribes work. Nobody wins awards for not conforming. When you transgress, when you colour outside the lines, you become the weakest link. But who decides that? Who makes up these rules, to begin with? Are awards really just *re-ward systems* designed to control and reinforce the status quo? Are they merely about placing arbitrary ideals on a pedestal, to aspire to, and to be admired?

In a 2017 interview on *Morning Live*, dancer/choreographer and contemporary conceptual un-dance icon Mamela Nyamaza explains that many South African artists, especially black artists, have difficulty accessing mainstream theatres.

‘Because of that, we marched earlier this year, protesting, talking about this lack of access.’ She is referring to the powerful and provocative protest she led, along with three other black, female artists at a regional theatre awards ceremony, hosted by a major theatre in Cape Town earlier that year. The interviewer interjects, asking, ‘What do you think has been at the centre of this lack of change or transformation?’ The interview relates to Mamela’s work, *Rock to the Core* (2017), an activist performance in which four black female performers confront the lingering whiteness of the South African

performing arts industry – with building materials, sheepskins and machetes ...

Two years later, I am on the phone with Mamela, talking about whether, to her mind, anything has changed in the intervening years. She has subsequently headlined the Main Programme of the National Arts Festival in Makhanda (Grahamstown), as its very first black female featured artist (as Mamela’s biggest fan, I proudly own that decision, in my role as the Festival’s then-executive producer). Towards the end of last year, Mamela went on to assume the dual role of deputy artistic director of the State Theatre in Pretoria, as well as curator of the all-new Dance Umbrella Africa.

Mamela and I talk about that regional theatre awards ceremony where she protested. And about Johannesburg’s patently problematic regional theatre awards ceremony. She is consistent and committed to speaking her truth. She cites a lack of funding and a lack of access to infrastructure as the key elements for no movement and no change in the status quo. We talk about how the continued proliferation of cut-and-paste Broadway musicals in South African casino theatres and state-funded theatres (and private theatres), is a plebeian opiate for audiences who should be stretched, challenged and primed for original performance work with a slightly higher common denominator (at the very least), in terms of its contextual relevance, artistic integrity and/or intellectual base.

As the producer of the annual Arts & Culture Trust (ACT) Awards from 2005 to 2010, I tried to manage the inherently arbitrary, often subjective, and always problematic nature of arts awards by establishing an adjudication panel, which rotated annually (in its entirety) to avoid gate-keeping and cabals dispensing awards to the same members of the clan, year after year. Looking back at the evolution of the ACT



Awards system over that period, the diverse range of hugely deserving awards recipients is a testament to the need to balance institutional knowledge with new blood. The same holds true for convening demographically diverse panels for the Standard Bank Ovation Awards (when I produced those), and ditto for ensuring a diversity of appropriately qualified, new and independent voices around the table for the first-ever Cape Town Fringe Fresh Awards (which, incidentally, was all new blood).

As Business and Arts South Africa NPC (BASA) announces the finalists of the 22nd Annual BASA Awards partnered by Hollard, we have seen categories come and go with a total of 25 different categories having been presented since 1998. During that time BASA has recognised and celebrated 290 business and arts partnerships. That number is set to increase to 304 this year!

With the bright-eyed, laser-focused, not-so-newly-appointed Head of Marketing, Savannah Feeke, holding the reins for the 2019 BASA Awards, our tribe is all about

mutually beneficial partnerships, shared value and social cohesion. If that’s not your vibe then **YOU ARE THE WEAKEST LINK!**

#TheTribeHasSpoken **CF**

Fun Fact: Standard Bank has won the most BASA Awards to date with an overall total of 15 awards under their belt, followed by Rand Merchant Bank and PPC Ltd in joint second place with 7 awards each, followed by Absa with 6 awards and Nando’s with 5 awards.



ASHRAF JOHAARDIEN nurtures multiple passions and has been associated with several major South African arts and culture organisations in various roles over the last two decades. He is the CEO of Business and Arts South Africa NPC (BASA) and a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria.