

When Jade thought no one was looking



Courtesy Simon Diener

She stood on stage, her heart beating rapidly, tiny beads of perspiration accumulating at her hairline, and her words just came out wrong. Eighteen-year-old Jade Bowers had grown up in Table View and had always been involved backstage for school productions like the One Act Plays, but to be accepted for the Theatre & Performance Degree at the University of Cape Town, she had to pass an acting audition.

“I never wanted to be an actor and my audition was terrible, ridiculously horrible! I remember standing in front of Yvonne Banning and she must have thought, What is this child doing?” Jade recalls. To this day, Jade is most comfortable behind the scenes.

Ambitious and resilient, the young Jade dusted herself off and opted for Plan B, a general BA with Drama as her major at the University of Cape Town (UCT), and then on to Wits, it was the only institution that would enable her to complete her Honours in Theatre Design with a focus on set and

costumes, and it was here where Jade developed the most unexpected friendship with Ashraf Johaardien.

Fast track to recent times and our young heroine is being awarded with prestigious accolades such as the Standard Bank Young Artist For Theatre 2016, Naledi Best Director of a Play for *Scorched* (2016), Silver Ovation Award at the National Arts Festival for *What the Water Gave me* (2014) and a Naledi Award nomination in 2015 in the category Best Production for *Cutting Edge*. Jade is also the Production Manager for the UJ Theatre and Con Cowan Theatre and runs her own company, Jade Bowers Designer Management, after hours. This is her story.



Jade Bowers on stage at the Naledi Awards

Ashraf Johaardien was Head of Wits Theatre at in 2010 when Jade, an Honours student, met him. Jade laughs and says for her final directing piece she used one of Ashraf's plays and had the audacity to ask him to perform in it! "We did a shortened version of *Salaam Stories* for my final directing exam and that's how we started working together."

When Ashraf moved to University of Johannesburg (UJ) five years ago, while Jade at the time worked as Stage Manager at Wits Theatre, he asked her to join him for the same position at UJ. Jade became the Resident Stage Manager on a contract basis, but as she needed a permanent job, she

joined DALRO, the Dramatic Artistic and Literary Rights Organisation, a multi-purpose copyright organization where Jade took care of the admin to assist clients with the necessary licenses to perform musicals and plays. “As I worked flexi hours, DALRO allowed me to continue my creative work which meant I could attend rehearsals and have the necessary freedom.”

Jade attributes much of her success in the industry to Ashraf. “He pushed me to do what I do now,” says Jade. “After *Salaam Stories*, we did *iHamlet*, adapted by Robin Malan.”



On many occasions, Jade and Ashraf would spontaneously decide to put on a play, just the two of them, and then make do with bits and pieces they could find at home to make the costumes and the set. “I would direct and design while Ashraf would act and write.”

Then in 2014, towards the end of *What the Water Gave me*, Jade fell pregnant. “I always say *What the Water Gave me* was MacKenzie, my son.” Soon after, a collaboration between Jade Bowers Designer Management and UJ saw the production of *Tin Bucket Drum*. “I couldn’t travel with the production to the Grahamstown Festival in 2015 because my son had just been born, and while I was at home, I received a phone call from Ismail Mohamed, director of the Grahamstown Festival. “We want to offer you the Standard Bank Young Artist for 2016,” he told Jade. For Jade, it was unbelievable news and opened a whole new platform. “You think when you are doing your little dinky plays that no-one

is really watching, but apparently they are,” she said.

For the first time, she had a real budget! “I didn’t know where to start, but luckily I had Ashraf.” They discussed different plays and decided on a script Ashraf had put on the shelf. The play was called *Scorched*, and Jade read the entire script in one night. “It was a chunk of a play, four acts, but I couldn’t put it down. I was like ‘yip’ this is one the one I’m going to do.”

Scorched premiered in Grahamstown, had a run at UJ and was taken to the Playhouse in Durban. With a cast of eight, it was the largest cast Jade had put together! The play, set in the Middle East, tells a story of twins whose mother passes away. She leaves them letters, and the brother and sister travel to find out more about her. “The story is very relevant to South Africa,” says Jade. “It has a lot to do about displacement and travelling, identity, family history and refugees. Ilze Klink played the mother and was awarded Naledi Best Actress in a play for her role.”

In 2017, Jade and Ashraf had another successful run with their next production, *Black*.



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Artists are called to their job, the same way teachers are called, and the same way technicians are called, Jade believes. “What drives me to do what I do is telling the

stories that don't always get told. Especially in the diversity of South Africa, where we have struggles with access to space, access to education, access to be able to talk and show Coloured stories beyond the stereotype roles that Coloured people are placed in, specifically on television and on stage. To break those barriers is really what I would like my work to be about."

Growing up in Cape Town and living in Table View for most of her school years, an artistic skill has passed down from generation to generation. "My grandfather's brother was a master craftsman, a carpenter. I only know this from stories from my father because he used to work for my uncle after school. As a result, my dad's pretty handy with tools and he makes most of my sets because as you know, only certain projects get money! So, whenever there isn't any, he generally builds my sets."

In her current position at UJ, Jade enjoys working with the technical team. "I'm still finding my feet. I do all the venues, the technicians, front of house, contracts, bookings for both the UJ and Con Cowan theatre and rehearsal rooms.



Jade is now casting her eyes to the future technicians and how she can personally impact their lives. In partnership with UJ, she is working on a technical internship for students in 2019, creating a space where they will receive hands-on

experience in the theatre, be involved with productions after their regular classes at the university, and be imparted with a passion for theatre.