

## Aardklop creates a platform for new talent



Parlotons & Kie

### Nicole Barnes from ETECH catches up with the technical team behind the Aardklop festival hosted in 2018

Aardklop national arts festival, held annually in Potchefstroom, North-West Province, has over the past 20 years established a reputation for providing festival-goers with a varied and rich celebration of South African arts and culture. The festival offers a five-day programme packed with drama, music, poetry, literature and art exhibitions – as well as great food, locally made beverages, craft markets and a general celebration of all that is *lekker*.

Blond Productions, one of South Africa's leading technical solution providers for both the live entertainment and broadcast markets, has provided Aardklop with comprehensive technical support for the past three years. Managing director of Blond Productions, Christiaan Ballot, has been delivering technical support for Aardklop for a number of years and shares some of the challenges involved in providing technical services at an event of this nature.

In recent years, Aardklop has grown to become one of the highlights of South Africa's cultural calendar. This year, the festival brought no less than 85 original South African productions to the stage, along with a plethora of musical performances, poetry and book readings, as well as visual art exhibitions.

Aardklop not only supports the development of a thriving creative community in South Africa but also plays a critical role in bringing much-needed revenue to Potchefstroom. According to the local executive mayor, Kgotsso Khumalo, the 2017 iteration of Aardklop created an estimated 350 temporary jobs and brought a welcome stream of tourists to the area, with more than 70,000 visitors flooding the small town during the festival.

Technical manager for Aardklop, Pieter-Jan "Kappie" Kapp, has more than 25 years' experience in the festival environment and works closely with Blond Productions, equipment suppliers, artists and the community to cater for the technical needs of the festival.

Kapp is tasked with ensuring that the 13 indoor venues used as performance spaces during Aardklop are equipped to enable the staging of professional productions. "We use school halls, municipality banquet halls, and church halls – whatever we can get – and the community uses many of these venues for activities on a regular basis. Working out a schedule that accommodates everybody's needs is a huge challenge," Kapp says. "As many of the venues are not designed for professional theatre, equipping the venues demands an advanced level of technical expertise and creativity to ensure that professional production standards are maintained for every show that the festival stages."

Blond Productions has earned a reputation as a provider of choice and has given comprehensive technical support to a number of national art festivals, held at various locations across the country – and often in trying conditions.



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Ballot, however, relishes these challenges and remains deeply committed to supporting the country's art festivals. "I have been working at festivals since my earliest days as a technician, and there is something very special about what a festival has to offer," he shares. Ballot goes on to explain that while Blond Productions is better known for its work in the film and television markets, supporting national art festivals is a labour of love for his team. "Everybody brings a unique passion, dedication and willingness to collaborate, which one rarely sees outside of an event of this nature – and, as a result, technicians want to come back year after year," he states.

Blond Productions is the main technical supplier to Aardklop and Ballot and his team not only supply all of the sound, lighting and staging equipment, but also extend comprehensive technical support to all of the festival's indoor performance venues. "This approach takes a lot of pressure off artists and performers but puts a lot more pressure on technical crews. However, Blond Productions has never failed to rise to the challenge," Kapp says.

Making sure that all venues are adequately staffed and equipped to achieve the standards demanded by a national arts festival is not without its challenges. Ballot explains that the Blond Production team work closely with Kapp in the months leading up to Aardklop to develop a technical rider that ensures all venues are provided with sound, lighting and staging equipment to suit the programme assigned to each venue.



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## **BLOND RAISES THE SOUND BAR**

Blond Productions recently added a brand-new L-Acoustics Kiva II to their inventory, which they debuted during Aardklop at the North-West University Auditorium, which hosts the festival's premium music and drama productions.

L-Acoustics' Kiva II is a new ultra-compact modular line source, adding 6dB of max SPL versus its predecessor, maximised amplifier density with 16-ohm impedance and a new sturdy cabinet. Despite its ultra-compact form, the Kiva II features L-Acoustics' Wavefront Sculpture Technology (WST), giving it a long-throw capability and delivering even SPL from the front row to the back of the auditorium. Its coplanar transducer arrangement and new K-front grill generate a symmetric horizontal coverage of 100 degrees without secondary lobes over the entire frequency range. Weighing only 14 kg, the Kiva II's elegant lines and flush-fitted rigging allow it to melt into any architecture, making it a natural fit for installations in performing arts centres and special events demanding minimal visual obtrusion.

Product experts from DWR assisted the Blond Productions team by delivering product-specific training ahead of the festival. To ensure optimal performance at Aardklop, Blond Productions and DWR worked in close collaboration to ensure that the Kiva II modular line source was correctly rigged and aligned before the opening performance at the NWU Auditorium.



Harry & Jackie

In addition to their impressive investment in L-Acoustics, Blond Productions also added the DiGiCo SD 11 digital mixing system to its inventory, which they also used for the first time at Aardklop in the NWU Auditorium. According to Ballot, DWR Distribution's DiGiCo product specialist, Kyle Robson, made sure that the Blond Productions team were fully equipped to operate the DiGiCo SD11 digital mixing system ahead of the event, and continued to provide on-site support throughout the festival.

"We were very excited to see our new L-Acoustics Kiva II, in conjunction with DiGiCo's SD 11 digital mixing system, in action at the festival's flagship venue. Our impressive new inventory, backed by the DWR team, guaranteed that the NWU Auditorium was equipped to meet – and exceed – the demands set by the high-calibre productions staged at the venue throughout the festival," says Ballot.

## **A JOINT VENTURE**

Kapp points out that national arts festivals such as Aardklop are critical in ensuring that South Africa retains its

artistic and socially diverse identity. However, he identifies the lack of funding as a constant struggle. “In South Africa, the lack of funding for national arts festivals makes it very challenging to secure products and services that fit our limited budgets. We are very lucky that service providers, equipment suppliers and distributors understand this and continue to tailor their pricing and service offerings to get the job done despite limitations,” Kapp says.



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Ballot adds to this idea, stating that partners such as DWR Distribution, Wild&Marr and Stage Audio Works – to name a few – play a critical role in keeping the country’s festivals alive. “These companies not only ensure that we have access to leading brands and rock-solid support if a unit goes down, but they often provide their time and expertise without asking much in return. Without this support, we would not be able to deliver a professional-level festival,” Ballot asserts.

Ballot goes on to state that DWR Distribution’s involvement ahead of Aardklop proved to be a game-changer at this year’s event (2018). “In the months leading up to Aardklop, we contacted festival technicians to find out if they were familiar with grandMA and dot2. All technicians were afforded the opportunity to attend training on these platforms ahead of the event at DWR’s offices, which ensured that operators and programmers were confident and equipped when they arrived at front of house.”

One of the most important objectives of Aardklop is to create a platform for young South African artists to hone their skills and gain much-needed experience. Ballot points out that the same is true for the country’s technical talent. “When I was a student at the Tshwane University of Technology, I cut my teeth as a technician at festivals such as Aardklop, as did the majority of my colleagues,” he says.

In addition to providing students with an opportunity to perform at a national festival of a very high calibre, Aardklop provides a platform for students studying stage management and technical theatre to work on professional productions, often for the first time. “We draw our pool of junior technicians from universities across the country, and I speak from first-hand experience when I say that this is how young technicians develop the skills and relationships necessary to be successful in their professional careers.



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“On the one hand, the festival provides junior technicians and students with the opportunity to work on professional productions, using the technology that they are most likely to encounter in the professional market. At the same time, it is a safe and nurturing environment. Making a mistake is an opportunity to learn, rather than a career limiting experience,” Ballot explains.

In addition to providing technical suppliers with the product support that DWR is renowned for, Ballot points out that the company goes above and beyond to ensure the fostering of new talent and the sharing of knowledge at Aardklop.

DWR’s technical specialist, Jannie de Jager, teamed up with Ballot to offer a short introductory class on technical theatre and lighting design ahead of the festival. De Jager remained onsite throughout Aardklop to offer students, junior and senior technicians much-needed support and guidance. “One cannot underestimate how important it is for young technicians to be afforded the opportunity to interact with experts such as Jannie and Kyle. Aardklop often provides junior crew members with their first taste of professional-level technical theatre experience. Having technicians and product experts of Jannie’s calibre available onsite to guide and encourage them is valuable beyond measure,” Ballot says.



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Managing director of DWR Distribution, Duncan Riley, concurs with Ballot, concluding that: “The majority of today’s leading technicians started their careers at art festivals. Offering our support to festivals such as

Aardklop is essential to ensure that the country's up-and-coming technicians are afforded the opportunity to grow into the professionals that will carry the industry to a prosperous future. As a result, DWR Distribution will continue to provide support, technical expertise and training opportunities to ensure that arts festivals continue to thrive in South Africa."