Chatting to dynamic Sue, founder of the Hilton Arts Festival

Posted on February 13, 2025



Copyright © DWR Distribution

On a cold, wet and windy night standing in a queue for curry and red wine at midnight at a building called The Old Gaol, the second oldest building in Grahamstown and until vacated in 1975, the oldest functioning prison in South Africa, Sue Clarence and a friend patiently waited. They were at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival and by the time they reached the front of the queue, the food was sold out.

“We decided we could do it all better ourselves,” smiles Sue. And at this defining moment in 1993, the Hilton Festival was born.



While Sue worked in the theatre for a company called Theatre for Africa, her friend taught at the Hilton College in KwaZulu Natal. “Back then, absolutely everything was a challenge, a bit like now,” Sue recalls. “We returned from Grahamstown, persuaded the local paper, then The Natal Witness, to come on board as a sponsor, and then ‘just kinda, casual like’ informed the Headmaster of our plans. We were walking out of his office before he’d had a chance to say no!”

Copyright © DWR Distribution



Two months later and the pair staged six productions, all in the now Grindrod Bank Theatre, all performing twice. There was a tiny beer tent and Sue made tea in polystyrene cups for the public using a kettle, not even an urn. “We ran at 110% capacity as our ticketing system was useless,” she says. “There were indeed people who stood by me to assist in making this dream a reality, the theatres and theatre practitioners of SA and the talented, hard-working and dedicated technicians who turned dreams into reality.”

The festival has grown from one performance venue to seven, has added lecture venues and informal music venues, an extensive craft market has developed and there are over 80 exhibiting artists. “We have attracted sponsorship which has enabled us to grow and delivery quality and we have developed an entire schools’ day in addition to the festival itself,” said Sue.



Iconic lighting designer, Mannie Manim says the festival is one of the major events on the SA

Copyright © DWR Distribution

Calendar. “For 25 years and counting the Hilton Festival has presented the best of SA performing and visual arts over a three-day weekend in the Natal Midlands,” says Mannie. “This has largely been made possible by the indefatigable Sue Clarence who had the original idea and has been the driving force. She has curated the programme, organised the festival and seen it grow exponentially over 2 ½ decades. I have always relished an invitation to attend and participate in the well-organised festival, to see the other productions on display and to enjoy the brilliant audiences that throng to attend the productions, dance, concerts, exhibitions, talks, discussions and displays. Long may Sue and the Hilton Festival prosper.”



With theatre in her blood and part of her psyche, Sue will not allow KwaZulu Natal to become a theatre free zone. “I am most proud of the fact that we can provide a platform, in a festival setting, where we can deliver such a high standard of technical excellence, thereby attracting top theatre managements who know that their productions are not at risk of appearing tatty. The Baxter Theatre is a prime example. They trust us to deliver the goods. The work being done in Cape Town and Johannesburg must have a platform here as well. Art is the soul of the nation. During the Second World War, it was suggested to Churchill that the Ministry for War should take the budget allocated for the arts as well as their own. He replied, ‘Then why are we fighting?’ The Hilton Festival is a team effort. Everyone works to help everyone else to make sure that we deliver excellence on time and with a smile. All this despite exhaustion, trying conditions and, often, difficult customers. Thank you to Black Coffee and DWR Distribution for supporting the dream and being superb sponsors.”

Copyright © DWR Distribution



Evan Robert is one of Sue’s good friends. With humour and love, he ends with some things you may want to know about Sue. “Sue adores her cats. Loves cheese, lamb and chews bones till they are almost nonexistent. She is a water girl… Loves the ocean and being in the water. Hates the heat. Loves bubbles and gin and tonic. Is a stickler for grammar. Avid reader, loves Noel Coward. Hates opera singers. Loves nature and plants. Slightly technophobic. Only joined facebook two years ago. Passionate about theatre and education. Comes from a family of lawyers.”



Copyright © DWR Distribution