Plea for Support for the technical industry

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#Feedourcrew, supported by DWR Distribution's SOS Charity Fund, are hoping to give a final push to raise funds internationally for event industry freelancers and theatre

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technicians in South Africa. This very hardworking and dedicated group of people have struggled to put food on the table during the national lockdown due to Covid-19 lockdown. Nicole Barnes of DWR paints a picture of the sad situation so many people are facing.

In late December 2019, reports about a strange pneumonia affecting some provinces in China seemed of little significance to us in South Africa. However, for those of us with colleagues and friends in China, the desperate calls for masks and other health-related supplies by mid to late January 2020 brought the issue a little closer to home.

Weeks later, news spread of people falling ill and dying in Europe, the UK and America and, in what felt like a blink of an eye, the world suddenly and irrevocably changed. One heartbeat later and the World Health Organisation confirmed that we were dealing with a world-wide pandemic, and no country would be left unscathed.

In early March, the first rumblings started that the South African Government would be implementing a range of measures to mitigate the risks posed by the unknown disease in South Africa. Companies in the events sector saw the first in a slew of event cancellations, as rumours grew that South Africans who had recently travelled to affected countries were testing positive for the virus. Before we knew it, all schools were closed and gatherings greater than 50 people were banned. In that moment, every stakeholder in the events industry was forced to come to terms with the reality that our industry would be the first to feel the impact and would likely be the last to recover from the economic tsunami set off by the Covid-19 quake.

On 15 March, President Cyril Ramaphosa confirmed our worst fears, and declared a national state of disaster. The government implemented a nation-wide lockdown, effectively confining every citizen to their homes for four weeks.

While the lockdown was deemed necessary to give the Government time to prepare the country’s health sector for the onslaught of the pandemic, Kagiso Masimini of Black Motion Productions, identified another immediate and urgent threat. “There are hundreds of freelance technicians that rely on events to make a living. This army of highly skilled, dedicated and hard-working professionals make a living from gig to gig. While often ignored by labour movements and government departments, and little appreciated by those who enjoy events, without them there would be no national celebrations, concerts, corporate or sporting events in South Africa or anywhere in the world,” he points out.

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Kagiso realised the enormity of the crisis about to hit the events industry, and released a series of videos, aimed at the Presidency, to highlight the plight of those that rely on events to make a living in the wake of the lockdown regulations. As days turned to weeks, the pleas for help started coming in from technicians all over the country, and it quickly became apparent that the industry would have to take matters into its own hands.

Technical Production Manager at MGG, Tamsyn Strydom, contacted Kagiso about the work that he was doing, and together with Gomolemo Madumo, Landy Yeatman, Marcia Alves, Sasha Raubenheimer, Vickie Whitehead and Daria Higgins they decided to establish a temporary fund to try to support those most in need. “Once we had made up our minds to do something, it took about two days to get the fund up and running,” Tamsyn points out. “It would never have been possible without the support we received from Landy Yeatman, as her organisation People4Purpose provided the legal framework that we needed to run as an NGO,” Tamsyn adds. “It also grew with additional people stepping in to help like Debra Batzofin and Duncan Riley of DWR Distribution and the SOS Charity Fund.”

Over the past two months, the #FeedOurCrew initiative has been able to provide shopping vouchers for over 350 families, who’s primary breadwinners are no longer able to make a living due to the closing of the events industry. “The #FeedOurCrew fund has raised R280 000. Originally each recipient was given a voucher for R1000. Due to dwindling funds and a huge increase in applications, we are now giving recipients vouchers of R500 each. This has helped just over 350 freelance technicians that are currently completely without any form of income and do not qualify for UIF,” says Tamsyn.

As the crisis deepened, donations are drying up as both businesses and individuals in the sector are running out of funds themselves. To date, government relief has not addressed any of the needs of the industry, despite multiple appeals. At the initiation of the hard lockdown, The Department of Arts and Culture announced a relief fund to be distributed among affected persons in the industry, and not a single freelance technician has benefited to date.

“We have done everything that we can as an industry to support our most vulnerable colleagues,” says Tamsyn. “Unfortunately, we are only able to do so much, and an institutional response is desperately needed.”

As the majority of South Africans return to work under Level 3 lockdown regulations, the events industry remains firmly behind bars. If the pandemic follows the trajectory predicted by analysts,

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there are unlikely to be any events in South Africa until at least the first quarter of 2021. Unfortunately, if the government and the private sector ignores the plight of the technical events industry, there will be nothing left by the time that we reach level 0 of the phased lockdown approach.

If one reflects on South Africa's greatest moments as a free nation, images of Nelson Mandela's iconic inauguration come to mind. As does the glorious celebration of our nation during the FIFA 2010 World Cup. We remember when artists around the world raised their voices against the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in South Africa and across the world during the 46664 concerts in 2003. We recall with pride as people from every corner of the globe joined some of the world's leading artists in a humanitarian call to action during the Global Citizen Festival in 2018. Not one of these moments would have been possible without the hard work and dedication of freelance technicians, production companies, lighting designers, sound engineers, riggers and stagehands – who are always the first to arrive on site and the very last to leave.

The theatre, and the technicians who make it possible to stage work, played a seminal role in our country's journey from tyranny to freedom. Works by Athol Fugard, John Kani and others brought our stories to audiences across the world during our darkest hours and offered an opportunity for social healing in the years after apartheid. More recently, Aubrey Sekhabi's *Marikana the Musical* furthered the debate about ongoing injustice in our country. As we all question our individual rights versus the State's measures to curb a disaster, the theatre offers a platform for social healing as it has always done – unless there is nobody left to turn on the lights and lift the curtain!

South Africa is unique in our ability to rise up over adversity, to join hands in song and celebrate – no matter how desperate the situation. Our ability to sing and dance in the face of disaster is the glue that holds our nation together. We are at risk of forever removing the bonds that make that glue work unless Government delivers on the promises it has made and corporate South Africa heeds our distress call.

We call on every person who has ever attended a concert, theatre show, political rally, religious gathering, football game, rugby match, a play, festival, or corporate event to please contribute today and make an investment in this nation's joy tomorrow!

Donate Here: https://www.backabuddy.co.za/champion/project/feed-our-crew

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