

Positive vibes with Gontse Nkoko



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With his chocolate skin, tattoo-covered arms and a great laugh, Gontse Nkoko looks the part, but it's his servant heart and love for people that has made him flourish in the South African live events industry.

For the past eight years, Gontse has worked on the popular television talent show *Idols South Africa*, initially as a production assistant. "We were at the State Theatre one year, and the person who was meant to work backstage couldn't make it," Gontse recalls. "I jumped in and that's when I started helping Kai Masterton, the floor manager." Today, Gontse is the production manager at *Idols* and thrives in the role of floor and backstage manager, working with colleagues like lighting designer Joshua Cutts and technical director Eben Peltz.

"I was born, bred and buttered in Pretoria," smiles Gontse. He grew up in the church, where singing was an important part of his life, and as a result, he was part of the University of Pretoria Youth Choir and the Jacaranda Children's Choir. Always fascinated by marketing campaigns and the trendy team who set up marquees, sound and lighting, Gontse enrolled to study marketing but after six months realized he was more interested in the technical side and went on to study Sound Engineering.

Gontse was all ears when his friend, Thulani Dlamini, told him about a learnership programme offered by The South African Roadies Association (SARA). Taking his very first tax trip to Johannesburg in 2011 he met with SARA's Palesa Ralehoko and with the programme running at full capacity, he was put on the waiting list for the following year. "I remember my mom organizing everything," said Gontse. "I got a flat in Braamfontein – my car is bigger than the flat, and I started at SARA in February 2012. I didn't have a full learnership and I was put in the workshop where I cleaned gear and the lighting desk. I came in knowing nothing about lighting."

A couple of months later, Gontse was one of four SARA delegates chosen to job shadow the technical Dream Sets crew who were working on the South African Music Awards (SAMA) held at Sun City in May 2012. "When we got there, Dream Sets were already a couple of days into the build, and I obviously met one of the owners, Sean Hoey. We were asked where we wanted to work and I felt that as this was a learning opportunity, I may as

well do something I knew little about and chose lighting. I helped out, organizing cables and DMX and just being an 'eager beaver'. I think that's what caught Sean's attention. As the day progressed, the site become dirty and I cleared up, making sure that everything was back to normal. Every now and then I'd go to Sean to ask how I could help."

Days went by, Gontse waking up at 5am and leaving the site at 10 pm when it was finally time for rehearsals and an additional followspotter was needed. Gontse distinctly recalls Sean speaking to him, "Dude, I'm going to throw you into the deep end and you're going to followspot on a Super Trouper." Gontse climbed the catwalk, not used to being so high up, and he was one of four followspotters, fondly remembering the very hot lever of the Super Trouper! "I did the first rehearsal, and I was so nervous," he says. "When it was time for the actual live show, I was super scared. I called a friend and she said, you've got this." Gontse's name was added to the production credits and it was then that his mom realized what he did, before then thinking he was just a loud DJ.

"At the SAMAs I was inspired by the guys who knew and loved what they are doing, from TUT students who also worked on the gig to Herman Wessels who was on the catwalk doing power cables." When the show ended Gontse recalls Sean Hoey and Leanne Bancroft standing outside and saying, 'Well done, we are proud of you, and we'll call you.'



The next day Gontse went back to Johannesburg and then worked energetically at SARA for almost a month when Dream Sets asked him to work on an event held at Theatre on the Track. President of the SA Roadies Association, Freddie Nyathela, encourages learners to take work that comes their way and to return to SARA during their free time. After freelancing at Dream Sets for six months, Gontse was able to buy his first car, a Chevy Spark!

Gontse admits to learning the hard way when appointed store manager at Dream Sets. "I started prepping and loading gear and I remember my first encounter with Eben Peltz from the company," he says. "Eben was doing Idols at Moreleta Church in Pretoria. I was still young and I was switching on the screens to make sure they worked before loading them. What I didn't do was pack in the kettle plugs! The gear went to Moreleta Church and later when Eben returned to the office, did he let me have it, while I thought, 'This guy!' As time went on, we were fine again and I realized my mistake."

Eventually, Gontse found himself working on-site for events. "Because I've got this accent (note to reader: he sounds a bit like a white South African from Pretoria), many crew hands never thought I'd load a truck but I fought for my space," he grins. "I wanted to work, and we would load the truck together. The crew would say, 'this one, he's not going to make it but I'd push to be recognized, not wanting to just be some cheesy young boy. I wanted to get my hands dirty. I remember days when we would go to places like the Sandton Convention Centre. The first truck to arrive would be the staging truck. I'd help offload all the stages, pack them nicely upstairs, and then, the Pantech would arrive with the technical. We'd offload that and I would push to show

people that I wanted to be there and was willing to work. Once done, we'd prep the gear and then start working."

As the industry dictates long hours, Gontse firmly believes that you have to be a people person and a team player. "I always say that you have to work hard and put on good vibes. One thing I picked up about Sean Hoey is that when he has ideas, he executes them. Sometimes I'd ask myself how a set was even made, but he is a visionary when it comes to set building and with every idea, has the planning in place to accomplish it on point. I learnt a lot as I was growing, and Dream Sets shaped me."

Working with event companies at shows, Gontse met Kelly McGillivray, owner of theSQUAD Creative Events. "I told Kelly that I wanted to be part of the production side of things," he says. "I was 28 years old at the time and my goal was to be able to work in production by the age of 30. Kelly offered me a young salary and petrol money and I joined her in June 2014. I remember my small desk in the corner as I was learning production and searching for specific items needed for a show like chairs or props. Kelly is very creative, she has a good eye, and we did several shows including the relaunch of Mazda in South Africa, where the execution thereof was beautiful."

On the side, especially with social media being a new platform at the time, Gontse searched for shows and started to follow influential players in the industry, even those based overseas. He would send messages on Facebook and offer to work on events, free of charge, just to get additional exposure. Many people reached out to him and slowly he learnt and grew within the industry.

By 2015 Gontse was offered a permanent position at Idols SA. "I loved it because for me it was a broader platform to w had to be accountable. It was a little bit stressful, but I enjoyed it. I started doing call sheets, organizing crew and making bookings. Today still, I make sure that everything is aligned so that come the weekend with rehearsals, everything is in place." Fast a few years later and Gontse started helping on rehearsals as backstage and floor manager, a role he thrives in. "I enjoy making sure all ducks are in a row before we start the show, making sure the contestants have in-ears and that we are standing by." He also has freedom to work as a freelancer when opportunities come his way that don't interfere with his Idols' schedule.

Gontse is grateful to work in a creative space and reminds newcomers to the entertainment industry to put in the elbow grease while keeping a positive attitude. "Many in my generation had the opportunity to go to an institution to learn about technical, but the guys who came before us learned their job on site and there wasn't a course," he says. "People think that once they have a degree or diploma, they're sorted and can walk in and start their career behind a mixing desk or lighting console. It's not that. For me, studying is just to familiarize yourself with the working technical environment. The actual learning starts when you are on-site because what you learn in class and what you learn on site are two different things. Start from ground zero and work yourself up. You must do the dirty work, and a lot of people don't want to, before you can get where you want to be. Clean up cables, be a runner, be humble and have an expectation that you're going to start from the bottom, fight yourself all the way up and work to earn people's trust."

One thing Gontse always tells people is that to work in the entertainment industry, you have to have a love and passion for what you do, or you won't last. "It's crazy long hours, you are dealing with a lot of people, each dealing with their own drama, and you must always learn to find your ground, learn all you can and be hopeful. It's not an easy industry and it's not one of those industries where in two years you'll be wealthy. As you grow your hard work will pay off. If you have a love for this industry, it makes it more bearable... dis nie pap en vleis nie," he concludes.

In his free time, Gontse likes to spend as much free time as possible with his son. He is also a cyclist and enjoys going to the gym.