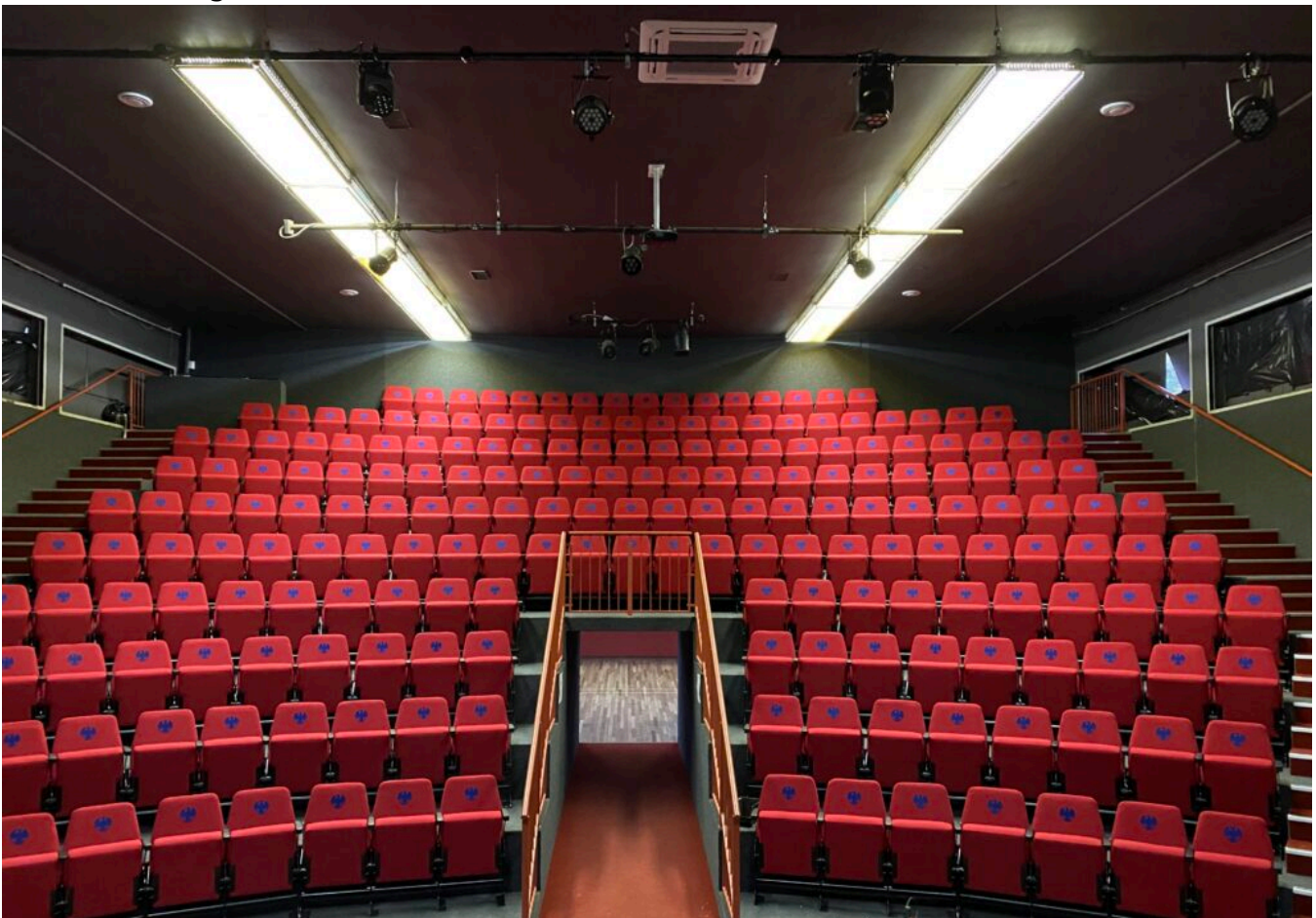


The magical story of The Gibson Kente Theatre

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New chairs complete The Gibson Kente Theatre at Hudson Park High School.

With the recent installation of brand-new chairs, The Gibson Kente Theatre at Hudson Park High School in East London, the Eastern Cape, is finally complete. The ambitious project, the brainchild of teacher Pierre Perold, started off with a letter to the National Lotteries Commission including a motivation that the school would extend its outreach drama programme to Bhongolethu Secondary School. Construction commenced in June 2015, and after working around a pandemic and hosting fundraising campaigns, the stage is finally open to both the school and for hire to the public, while keeping to a smaller audience.

The 206-seater raked amphitheatre is named after the late playwright and director, Gibson Mthuthuzeli Kente, the Father of Black Theatre and the township musical in South Africa who is renowned for his role in addressing the injustices of apartheid through drama and who was born in a township called Duncan Village outside East London. His family readily gave permission for the naming. Working within a very tight budget, the lighting rig was delivered and installed by DWR Distribution and comprises of a lighting bar, 2 Robin LEDBeam 150s, 3 Robin Parfect 150s, 8 Longman F4Ups and a dot2 by MA Lighting for control.



Pierre Perold is invested in all aspects of theatre, seen here in the Romeo



and Juliet performance at
the Gibson Kente
Theatre.

Pierre Perold, Head of Drama, is the unwavering man behind the theatre. Originally appointed as an English and Creatives Arts teacher at Hudson Park High School fifteen years ago, Perold painstakingly went through a yearlong administration process to introduce drama as a subject especially as he was first and foremost a drama teacher. Once he had introduced drama to the school, however, he found it extremely challenging when putting on plays in the hall. “The acoustics and lighting are normally a nightmare in a traditional school hall, and you are faced with many problems including how to execute scene changes and change backdrops,” Perold comments. “School stages really limit you to what plays can actually be performed. I am very adamant when directing students, to instil a sense of professionalism. I eventually knew that what I wanted, somehow, was to have a theatre built at my school so that I would no longer be hindered by the constrictive space of a school hall. I wanted an amphitheatre with raked seating, decent lighting and sound.”

It was a tall order, an almost ludicrous idea when considering that Hudson Park is a government school based in a country with little funds to spare but not for those who believe!

Perold recalls his first theatre experience in 1969 when he first started believing in the impossible. “The first show I remember seeing was Peter Pan at the Guild Theatre in East London,” he smiles. “I was only six years old, but it was pure magic seeing people fly across the stage and being absolutely petrified of Captain Hook. I remember the scene when Tinkerbell’s light was fading and one of the children’s characters asked the audience to shout, ‘I believe in fairies!’ I think I was first to stand on my seat and scream, truly believing that I saved Tinkerbell from dying until my parents finally told me to sit down!”



With no budget to build a state-of-the-art theatre, Perold took a chance and applied to LOTTO, which also serves as a grant funder to non-profit organisations to establish projects that improve the lives of everyday South Africans. It took him six months to formulate a proposal and there was an incredible amount of forms to be filled in. While he knew it would be a long wait, he consoled himself with the saying, 'All good things come to those who wait.'

A year later, the school received fantastic news! They would be receiving over a million rand! "I was naturally ecstatic! Then, began an extremely long journey," Perold recalls. "Understandably there were very strict processes to follow to obtain the actual funding, varying quotes had to be submitted and once approved, payment was made in order to begin construction. It began with the metal framework, then the wooden panels, together they consumed almost half our budget. Carpeting followed, then the lighting system was put in place."



Romeo and Juliet presented by The Arts Theatre of East London in the new Gibson Kente Theatre. Photo courtesy Schuleeta Scholfield, SasiPix.

Lighting Designer Michael Taylor-Broderick from DWR Distribution specified the lighting, and along with Nick Barnes, installed the equipment just a few months before the Covid-19 lockdown was implemented in South Africa. Taylor-Broderick recalls thinking very carefully to specify the right gear to accommodate this tight budget. He takes each project personally, never wanting to disappoint. A year later though, when being appointed to light a show, Romeo and Juliet, in the theatre and when presenting a lighting design workshop there, he sat as a practitioner instead of a supplier and realized the gear complemented the intimate space. The lighting offers enough flexibility and the dot2 platform is easy to operate.

When the funds ran out, the school kept their momentum with a fundraising project to obtain the seating and air conditioner, making the theatre fully functional by mid 2021.

“Unfortunately Covid-19 has indeed thrown the proverbial spanner in the works,” says Perold. “But I am sure that once restrictions have relaxed enough, we will be able to mount a variety of productions.” To date, the Gibson Kente Theatre has managed to have a few orchestra performances, two Disney productions, a lighting workshop presented by Michael Taylor-Broderick and a production of *Romeo and Juliet* presented by The Arts Theatre of East London. “I am hoping that COVID-19 will become more manageable due to vaccinations and that we can once again begin rehearsals and officially open the theatre next year with a Gibson Kente Musical called *Too Late*. We started rehearsing a few years ago, but due to unforeseen circumstances and COVID, the whole process had to be shelved.”



Pierre Perold, Head of Drama at Hudson Park High School.

The greatest response to the theatre has been from the learners for whom it was made. Perold’s classroom is upstairs in the gallery which has a view over the theatre hall. “Mine are possibly the only drama learners in the country with a theatre in their classroom and I constantly remind them of this privilege,” he comments. “Our aim is also to really reach out to communities that are not as privileged as we are and hopefully expose them to the arts, by having workshops and



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performances. Students from Bhongolethu will be given transport to the theatre as well as have a platform to share their talent under the mentorship of professionals.”

Show images courtesy Schuleeta Scholfield, SasiPix