

Third Brixton Light Festival Shines Bright, Delighting the Community



Copyright Craig Adams

There is a very special community living in Brixton, Johannesburg who regularly come together to bridge the gap between social groups with the emphasis on love, art and compassion, all with the aim of creating the kind of neighbourhood people want to call home. Throughout the year they present various events like their Youth Day Fashion show, a rally called Feast of the Nations, workshops and even things like watching movies on the tennis court, braais in the street, and reserving half an hour every Tuesday to pick up rubbish in the area.



Copyright Craig Adams

In early September, they celebrated the third annual Brixton Light Festival. The SOS Charity Fund sponsored the wages of 12 crew members who worked tirelessly to make the festival a reality, while DWR contributed Robe lighting fixtures to create mesmerizing special effects and illuminations on the iconic Brixton (Sentech) Tower. Gearhouse Splitbeam, led by Managing Director Alistair Kilbee, played a pivotal role as the primary technical supplier, who graciously provided equipment at a significantly reduced cost.



Copyright Heather Mason

In 2023, the festival's theme, "Where the Waters meet the Light" pays homage to Brixton's unique geographical location along the Witwatersrand watershed. Depending on which side of this watershed line rainfall occurs, water journeys either toward the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic on the opposite side. This thought-provoking theme has sparked the creativity and imagination of both community members and artists, serving as a source of inspiration for the event. Mark Schaerer, Brixton resident and one of the festival organisers says, "This line has historically also been used to divide. It underlies the pervasive lines of segregation and ongoing inequality in our city. But for Brixton this line gives us hope. The Light Festival offers our neighbourhood an opportunity to embrace our shared humanity by bringing exuberance and joy to our streets. It is our turning point."



Copyright Heather Mason

The Festival's artistic program was managed by Shade, a project space nestled in Brixton that seamlessly blends waste management, youth engagement, and the arts. Their innovative program, 'Waste Not Want Not,' receives support from the Goethe Institutes and the British Council's Sustainable Together Series. This initiative offers artists an exceptional opportunity through an artist residency, granting them access to Shade's extensive waste materials library. This year artists were invited to craft their creations specifically for the festival's parade. An impressive 280 artists and performers came together to participate in the Brixton Light Festival Parade, making it a truly remarkable spectacle.

The festival kicked off on Friday, 1 September with an Alley Exhibition opening which included a collage of works highlighting the Watershed that runs directly through the alley. It also included the Watershed Crossing on the intersection of Barnes and Wimbledon Rd, which was led by local artist, Bronwyn Findlay and is a community-made mosaic that both illustrates and marks out the meeting of the Indian and Atlantic Ocean on the street.



Copyright Heather Mason

On Saturday, the day started with a bustling market showcasing an array of local artisanal foods and goods. The highly anticipated street parade began at 18h30, captivating the entire community as it wound its way through the suburb. Along the parade route, spectators were treated to a diverse array of highlights, including amongst others, Brixton's very own "Local Vocal" choir led by Shairze Schaerer, Zimbabwean craftsman David Gara's ships installation, the enchanting melodies of the National Youth Orchestra, Field Band Foundation and NWU Brass ensemble, Hillbrow choir and Soweton punk band Shameless, thought-provoking poetry performances by Izigani Theatre and the eye-catching Sentech Croozers and Soweto Street Fighters, who adorned their modified bikes with lights to lead the parade.



Copyright Heather Mason

In the midst of all of this, Fried Wilsenach, a sound designer from The Working Dog and a resident of Brixton, put on his technical director's hat! He enlisted the lighting design expertise of Alex Farmer, Benjamin Mills and Oliver Hauser to also illuminate the iconic Kingston Frost Park, Brixton Water Tower and the Sentech Tower which has become a symbol of the festival, and was as deeply appreciative of the crew members who lent their assistance. Fried set up his Front of House (FOH) station on a concrete garage in his garden to accommodate an impressive lighting array including two Robe Tarrantula fixtures, two Robe Esprites, one Robe Forte and a Robe MegaPointe.



Copyright Nina Zylstra

“This is a special project that’s very close to my heart,” explained Fried Wilsenach. “Through active citizenship and continued innovation, our community strives to create a safe and friendly neighbourhood, improving the quality of life for all who are a part of it. It’s not always a straightforward process and we need to be mindful of our reality and its challenges. We are fortunate to have very talented and generous individuals amongst ourselves with a wide network of professional contributors who believe in the importance of an initiative such as the Light Festival. Seeing women and children walk and play on the streets of Brixton at 11pm on the 2nd of September was so good for the morale of the people who call this home. Another highlight for me and the crew was the real sense of comradery. There are no pay-grades for this event and we all have an equal role in our contribution. The crew wages, sponsored by DWR and the SOS Charity Fund, were divided equally amongst Senior and Junior technicians. The care that was put into making this a successful event and the great attitude from the technical team on the day, made this memorable.”



Copyright Heather Mason

Lighting Designer, Oliver Hauser adds, “Fried and I have been colleagues and friends for years. I’m not part of the Brixton community, but their passion for inclusiveness and diversity is contagious and is one of the many reasons I helped on this project. The festival is incredibly diverse in culture and celebrates the values of all its residents. There is a vibe of togetherness that this community radiates. You are always made to feel welcome no matter who you are. This is what I love most.”



Copyright Craig Adams

The Brixton Light Festival is a community-led and community-driven project supported by the City of Joburg Department of Transport, DWR Distribution and OHCHR and made possible by scores of volunteers. The Festival Committee, made up of residents and volunteers, are supported by hundreds of people from Brixton (and friends of Brixton) who have come together to celebrate this diverse neighbourhood with its special history. From fundraising to painting to making meals, donating time, resources and expertise – the People of Brixton light up the way and pull off an extraordinary feat of imagination and ingenuity.



Copyright Heather Mason

Duncan Riley from DWR expressed his enthusiasm, saying, “Being involved, even in a small capacity, in this unique project is truly a privilege for both the SOS Charity Fund and DWR Distribution. It seems to encapsulate an idyllic vision, making us wonder if this might be the very type of community Nelson Mandela had in mind when he envisioned the Rainbow Nation. It demonstrates that all things are possible. I can only imagine the memories the children living in Brixton will have when they think back to these good old days.”



Copyright Heather Mason