

# Shakespeare Schools Festival South Africa

## Cape Town Report

Artscape Theatre 16 -18 April 2019 Baxter Theatre 13 -18 May 2019

Visually impaired learner from Pioneer school

“The Festival restores a sense of purpose in the kids” - Darlington Sibanda,  
Teacher-Director Chris Hani Arts and Culture Focus school

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## Introduction

The SSF SA is an education program, aimed at improving language and social skills through the Performing Arts. It is **Educape's** flagship initiative, launched in 2010 by **Kseniya Filinova-Bruton**, to strengthen the link between the Arts and education. Since inception, the SSF SA has gone from 20 to 2000 participating youth and Learners across the Western Cape, Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Eastern Cape.

SSF SA has subsequently showcased 316 Shakespeare plays across South Africa, working with 6736 pupils from 321 schools. We have built the capacity of 510 teachers as drama and performance arts directors.

Staging a Shakespeare play in a professional theatre is a challenge to be relished. The SSF SA is ideal for young people seeking to explore their potential in a fun-filled, developmental way; simultaneously making their theatre debut on a professional stage in a non-competitive environment. The SSF SA is fully-interactive, and provides guidance and resources through scripts, training, framework and feedback, allowing Learners and Educators to successfully direct and perform Shakespearean plays from the first line to the final bow.

## Director's Note

As a little girl in St. Petersburg, Russia, my home country, I grew up within a theatre family. The experience of being in the theatre space; observing from the wings my mom rehearsing; roaming the corridors of the back stage; popping in to the wardrobe department to look at magical creations of costume designers; acting on stage at the tender age of 3 – are special moments, which installed my life-long love, and passion for, theatre.

My life's mission is to give these same opportunities to as many children as I possibly can. I want the theatre to become a special home for them too, and the stage a place where they grow their confidence and self-belief. I cannot emphasize how deeply-moving every SSF SA festival is for me.



*Kseniya Filinova-Burton (Left) Dr. John Kani (Right)*

My daily routine, as a Managing Director of the festival is far from glamorous. Over and above my main role as the coordinator of the festival schedule, I carry out extra work to keep costs down and ensure the festival is financially stable: This includes hosting workshops, and tasks such as picking up printing, and shopping for trophies.

And then we host the festival... It is a joy to behold the faces of the children as they enter the theatre dressing rooms for the first time in their life – wide-eyed with wonder, watch them go through their rehearsals, and finally perform live on stage, with such confidence, to an appreciative audience.

Add to that the creativity of the teacher-directors; the commitment and discipline every cast holds; and the pride and joy within each child, teacher, and parent in the audience. -All of this - and more – continually reminds me of why I do this work.

I believe that exposing children and young adults to works of Shakespeare (through our festival) gives them hope that the world can be a better place, and the future can be brighter than the brightest stage light.

## Participating Schools and Plays

This year the 9th Shakespeare Schools Festival South Africa (SSF SA) was dedicated to **Sonny Venkatrathnam** who passed away on 15 March at the age of 84.

During his incarceration on **Robben Island**, Venkatrathnam, an apartheid freedom fighter, smuggled in a copy of '**The Complete Works of William Shakespeare**,' disguised it as a Bible, and passed it between a number of prisoners, including **Nelson Mandela**. Many of the inmates marked their favorite passages in the book. Nelson Mandela's signature was found next to a quote from **Julius Caesar**: 'Cowards die many times before their deaths, the valiant never taste of death but once.'

This year's **Festival** opened on 16 April 2019 at **Artscape Arena** with the play by **Matthew Hahn** entitled '**The Robben Island Shakespeare**,' performed by former **Vista Nova High School** Learners, and young actors from the **Educasions Group**.



*Educasions company of actors*

The Festival continued with yet another line up of amazing plays, directed by dedicated teachers, and in some cases, student directors, with talented casts of young actors.

A total of 97 children and 12 teachers, from 7 schools took to the stage at Artscape Arena from 16-18 of April. Furthermore, 336 children and 44 teachers representing 19 schools wowed audiences at the **Baxter theatre** from 13-18 of May.

### The lineup of the festival was as follows:

#### April 16th, 2019

1. Educasions Group and Vista Nova School – 'Robben Island Shakespeare'

#### April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

2. We Few – 'Twelfth Night'
3. Darul Arqam Islamic High School – 'Hamlet'
4. Chris Hani School – 'Julius Caesar'

#### April 18th, 2019



5. Curro Durbanville – 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'
6. Worcester Gymnasium – 'Twelfth Night'
7. Westerford High School – 'Much Ado about Nothing'

### **May 13th, 2019**

1. Hermanus High School – 'Macbeth'
2. Wynberg Boys' High School – 'King Lear'
3. Wynberg Boys' Junior School – 'Hamlet'
4. Wynberg Girls' Junior – 'As you like it'

### **May 14th, 2019**

5. Herschel Girls' School – 'A Midsummers Dream Night'
6. Swartland High School – 'Romeo and Juliet'
7. Athlone High School – 'Anthony and Cleopatra'



*De la Bat School for the Deaf*

### **May 15th, 2019**

8. Pioneer School for visually impaired – 'Hamlet'
9. THE UNTOLD Creative Arts Group – 'The Tempest'
10. Anointed Girls – 'Romeo and Juliet'



*Victoria Primary School*

### **May 16th, 2019**

11. Curro Century City High School – 'Anthony & Cleopatra'
12. Chris Hani Arts and Culture Focus school – 'Julius Caesar'

### **May 17th, 2019**

13. Micklefield School – 'Romeo and Juliet'
14. Westlake Primary School – 'Macbeth'
15. Victoria Park Primary – 'Anthony and Cleopatra'

### **May 18th, 2019**

16. De la Bat School for the Deaf – 'Twelfth night'
17. Vista Nova High School – 'Macbeth'
18. Lalela Project – 'Romeo and Juliet'
19. Leiden High School – 'The Tempest'



*Leiden High School*

Leading up to the 2019 festival, organizer **Kseniya Filinova-Bruton** and Festival alumni and this year's festival MC **Tafara Nyatsanza** - who performed in Richard III at Maynardville - hosted **coaching workshops** for Learners from various participating schools.

We enjoyed every single performance, but some deserve a special mention:

**Pioneer School** for visually impaired learners performed '**Hamlet**.' These kids are amazing! As they arrived at the Baxter Theatre, one of the learners had a very bad, almost epileptic fit, due to lack of food in the morning and the medication, he took earlier. The theatre staff were really supportive. Front of House Manager Dale, in particular, took a very special care of the boy for few hours before the cast had to do their technical rehearsal on stage. Two of other cast members were not well due to flu and tiredness.



*Pioneer School for the visually impaired*

The day of the festival is long. Schools usually arrive in the morning to do an hour of technical rehearsal, then they wait. After lunch, schools do dress rehearsal and watch each other's plays, then wait some more. In the case of the Pioneer school, their performance was so strong and powerful during the dress rehearsal, that we decided they would go last on the night. -so, the cast had more waiting to do. Moreover, some of these kids suffer with anxiety, while dealing with blindness, and have to get used to the new theatre environment and surroundings that are not familiar to them. So, after such a long day, and dealing with many challenges these kids came on stage with such drive, power, energy, and commitment for their play – it was electric! Big congratulations to them and their director **Derek Daly** for brining another power house production to our festival. Bravo from the audience, and a well-deserved standing ovation!

**De La Bat School for the Deaf** took part in the festival for the second time this year. Their production of '**Twelfth Night**' also brought the audience to a standing ovation, this time, instead of the traditional clapping of hands, they responded with a Sign Language, quiet ovation, of hands shaking up in the air above their heads. At first, we were concerned about how the audience would take in a full, silent play, with a couple of moments of added music for the hearing, but with most of the actions done by learners on stage using SASL. Well, the talent of these learners left everyone speechless. The way they created characters was strong, three-dimensional and funny. The audience could easily follow the story. Grade 12 learner **Kopano**, who is truly a genius of a young man, directed the play. We will miss his participation in the future, as he leaves school this year to start his degree in law. We wish you all the best and trust the younger generation of De La Bat learners will continue the legacy of this extraordinary school's participation in the festival.

A number of schools, including **Leiden High School**, **Lalela Project**, and **The Untold Creatives**, developed their plays in a translated version in Afrikaans and IsiXhosa. **Chris Hani High School** took up the opportunity to perform twice in our festival, in both Artscape and Baxter theatres with powerful version of **Julius Caesar**.

This year, the school drop-out rate was quite high, due to various reasons which included exams, financial constraints and in one case the travel from Villiersdorp was not safe due to strikes in the area at the time of the festival. Schools which canceled their participation were -

**Some things to re-consider going forward** - we were approached by a performance group, based in Johannesburg, the leader, brought the girls to Cape Town. The girls were disengaged and distant from the festival and the other participants. Their production of '**Romeo and Juliet**' was 15 minutes long, we felt the production could have been stronger. We have identified that there was a lack of good communication with the festival and a lack of sufficient planning made for this group's participation. This was our first attempt at an interprovincial collaboration and have learned some valuable lessons to keep in mind when planning this sort of collaboration/exchange program between provinces. Going forward we will have to do better screening of participating groups, conduct a full risk assessment of the exchange program, and be vigilant with funding support.

## Silent Conversation

This year for very first time we opened up a space for silent conversation, by placing large sheets of paper in the Green Room of the theatre for schools, and in the foyer for the audience, to engage with our participants, parents and friends on the conversation around topics of Shakespeare and the festival impact.

**These are some of the questions and answers:**

From the **Green Room** – what our schools wrote...

Who is Shakespeare to you?	With Shakespeare I can...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a legend</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• express myself</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• a misunderstood writer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• learn different things</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• creative</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• learn a whole new world</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• king of literature</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• achieve confidence</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• best play writer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• achieve the impossible</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• god of sonnets</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• think deeper</li></ul>

• my hobby	• connect with others
• a human	• be an actress
• a great influencer	• experience acting
• an amazing poet	• explore emotions
• a personal therapist	
• a passionate writer	
• a master of tension	
• king of love	
• brings people together	

What has the Festival experience meant to you? How do you feel?	And this is what our audience said: How do you feel about Shakespeare?
• feels like home	• great
• I can express myself	• awesome and great. I never forget it
• I can be with different people	• best thing what happens in my life
• It was a privilege to be part of it	• brings people together
• new friendships	• I get confused from the language, but, it
• good experience	• has a great feeling to it?
• lovely	• great
• excellent idea	
• it's wonderful	
• express my talent	
• fun	

**Should Shakespeare be tested in schools?**



- Yes. it's cool
- No - other relevant works schools can do
- Yes - great learning experience
- Yes - themes are relevant
- His dramas cover all aspects of human existence
- It definitely should be studied. I enjoy it and the analysis of it. I think the themes are still relevant, as well as teaches us many valuable lessons
- No, I don't see how Romeo and Juliet helped me. There are many other relevant works we can do
- Yes 100%, people should get to learn and appreciate Shakespeare from a young age

### **What has the Festival experience meant to you? How do you feel?**

- Love it
- Excellent
- Provides opportunity to children
- "Excellent - keeps kids grounded, talent developing and crafting their skills"
- Amazing
- "A true meaning of old and young. Watching the kids bring the plays to life is just amazing"

### **Who does Shakespeare belong to?**

- God
- Whomever shall have him
- Women
- People who love literature
- Everyone
- To himself
- Shakespeare holds a space in our curriculum, however, as a student who does love literature, I find he is often taught one-dimensionally, and that means students can't seek him out because they aren't making him approachable and accessible

We also conducted number of **interviews with teachers** about their participation processes and the impact of the festival on them and their learners. Here are few responses:

**Chris Hani Arts and Culture Focus school – production of Julius Caesar, directed by Darlington Sibanda**

### **What play did you choose and What made you choose your play?**

- Julius Caesar. 2019 was election year and (the learners) felt they needed a play that was political and touched on the issue of democracy. They come from an era with a previous president that had a lot of issues and corruption. They looked at a play that surrounded the issue of betrayal and they felt that Julius Caesar fitted the bill.

### How do you get the learners to relate to the play?

- They needed to contextualize and to make Shakespeare relevant to their context. They realized that they would have to use whatever situation is happening in the country -then relate that to how Shakespeare would have viewed it, and which play could explain that situation -and take it from there.

In terms of picking a play and looking at wanting to explore something. Why Shakespeare? Why the festival as opposed to picking another play or creating another play? Why this process?

- The curriculum requires us to do a stylized play. (The learners) thought Shakespeare is timeless, and relevant to any situation, any country, and to any community. They felt that the best way to deal with the curriculum and issues currently happening in our country and society is to discuss how Shakespeare would have viewed our situation and then explore that through him.

When you came with your concept, it was hugely impactful. What was the process for you and the learners?

- It is to tap into the ability of the kids. Shakespeare is very difficult to understand, so if you going to bring him in, you are going to want to introduce it in a different way. They know the abilities of the kids and from there they look at how they can apply the abilities to the content.
- They looked at similar resources that they had in the school. They tried to be as simple as possible but needed to relate to them. They thought of how the kings and queens' rule in the Eastern Cape and came up with ideas.
- If a school doesn't have resources, they need to find a way to use the body and the voice to create a play. They need to look a lot at theatre technique and think a lot about township times and style.

### What was the effect of the Festival on the children?

- Massive effect
- Confidence

- Kids want to volunteer
- The Festival restores a sense of purpose in the kids
- There is complete revolution, in terms of attitude in the kids and work ethical
- Commitment
- Respect
- There is an idea of passion

### **Athlone High School – production of Anthony and Cleopatra, directed by Keziah Gabriel**

How does the school feel about the festival?

- The school has spirit; they meet once a week for drama club

How many years have you been partaking in the festival?

- This is our 2nd year

Does your school have a drama department?

- We don't have a drama department

What influenced your decision to explore Shakespeare?

- You would be surprised about how quickly kids pick up on things, if you give them a space to be, and explain the language, help them change the material, and try to help them understand.

What do you think about Shakespeare in schools?

- Shakespeare is not liked - due to not understanding the language. But there is so much to be learnt with the lessons in the plays. But it's not important.

Why did you decided to take part, if you have no drama department?

- The Principle wanted to bring drama back. They came one-by-one to the class and started with the very basics. They are now a family. Grade 8 – 12

Do you see a difference in the children and does the festival help them in school?

- It definitely will help them with Grade 12. I notice a lot of confidence in them.

How much effort do teachers put into the festival?

- The teachers put in a lot of effort.

How do you Fund Raise?

- Funding is being raised by past pupils

- Cast member's parents arranged transport

## SSF SA Team Members

Our festival team in Cape Town this year consisted of Festival Director Kseniya Filinova-Bruton, SSF SA Media and strategy manager Blythe Linger, MC Tafara Nyatsanza, Festival volunteer Cindy Tommy, and a very special guest volunteer from UK, Kate Hopewell.

**Below are reports from some of our team members of their festival experience:**

### Kate Hopewell

“Having worked with Shakespeare Schools Festival in the UK, I was delighted to have the opportunity to come to Cape Town and to volunteer any skills that might be useful.

Now, having had the privilege to experience the entire week of Festival nights at the Baxter Theatre, I am left with a sense of awe and wonder that will stay with me forever. Each cast brought a fresh, exciting and dynamic adaptation of Shakespeare stories.

By taking the themes and narratives and using them as storytelling tools, events that have happened in the past, in our own time and are happening now, day to day suddenly became so visceral. By using local and signed languages as well as modern English and Shakespeare's language accompanied with music, song and movement, each performance became unique, powerful and a representative of the wonderful students who were shining on the stage and making it their own. I hope that those of you who experienced the Festival might have been as moved as I was and might feel a similar need to ensure that it survives to its 10th year in 2020 and beyond.

SSF provides crucial skills, opportunities and confidence to young people who deserve to be heard, seen and nurtured as they grow to become the future adults in SA. Any help or support financial or in the provision of a service will ensure that the Festival can reach even more children and offer even more opportunities to local communities. Please do get in touch if this is something you would like to be involved with. I, for one, cannot wait to start planning for SSF 2020!”

### Cindy Tommy

“I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunities at both the ARTSCAPE and BAXTER theatre of being part of the SSFSA Cape Town team. My interaction with



directors/ teachers and learners/youth was that I was able to assist when needed and able to have direct communication at all times. This was my priority.

During company warm ups I had the most fun with youth/learners and also teachers who felt free to join in. I was able to bring my best self to the forefront and give of my best to the youth/ learners. I believe also that youth groups performing in the festival should be aware of their content and keep it strictly within a school-restricted content.

The Cape Town festival started with an astonishing bang and ended in grandiose.

"IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE, PLAY ON, GIVE ME EXCESS OF IT."

It has been my utmost pleasure being part of something bigger than myself. SHAKESPEARE'S SCHOOL FESTIVAL PLAY ON AND ON."

We also received warm **messages from parents**:

**Teresa George – parent from Vista Nova High School**

"I would just like to say what an amazing opportunity this was for my daughter. This is her first year in high school and so her first-time doing drama...wow -I don't know how to describe it...my daughter is 15 years old. She suffers from depression and anxiety plus selective mutism since a very young age.... now she is on stage acting...I just feel overwhelmed"

**Jenny Saunders – parent of a Vista Nova High School learner**

"I can't thank you and your wonderful team at SSFSA enough for all your hard work and dedication to bringing #Shakespeare alive to teenagers and giving them the opportunity to experience the stage and being able to perform to an audience.

My daughter has gained so much confidence from being able to be part of this Shakespeare festival and drama team. She attends Vista Nova High and she has dyslexia -so learning is difficult. If she had continued at a mainstream school, she would never been given this opportunity to flourish. She might have stayed wrapped up in a cocoon, never knowing her full potential.

I have watched Vista Nova perform Love Labor's lost, Richard III, Much Ado About Nothing -but their last performance of Macbeth was one of their best. I felt so incredibly proud of Jenna's performance, -but also for all the Vista Nova pupils. I was also blessed to see the other schools perform last year. They really excelled in their performances.

Next year will be Jenna's last year at the school, but I am sure she - like many other Vista Nova past pupils - will want to help others to learn to love Shakespeare.

I definitely want to support, and I was so sorry I never got the opportunity to fill out a form. I thank you for all the hours of prep!"

**Appreciations Notes**

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