

Dear Colleague in the international arts community,

I draw your attention to a crisis which is currently underway for the cultural and creative sector in South Africa. We are in a debilitating position and need your support. Artists and creative practitioners are suffering after more than a year without proper support from the national Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, and with severe mismanagement of the relief efforts that have happened so far. We would appreciate support from the international community for the creative practitioners who are engaged in a "sit-in" at the National Arts Council to hold our government to account.

### **What is happening?**

While most national relief attempts have been inadequate in the face of the complete devastation of the industry over the past year, the most substantial promise of support from Government came in November 2020, when funds to the order of 300 million rands were given to the National Arts Council for a Presidential Economic Stimulus Package (PESP) to support creative practitioners devastated by COVID19. This was a moment of hope and potential regeneration of the creative and cultural sector which had been decimated in the past year, but once again hopes were dashed by the mishandling of the grant by the National Arts Council, and the failure of the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture to hold them to account.

In brief, individual artists and organisations applied for the PESP funds and those successful were contracted on the basis of a particular rate per job retained/created by their proposal. Then, two months later, these same beneficiaries were informed that they would only get a percentage of the funds promised and/or contracted and were asked to sign revised contracts which substantially reduced the amount allowed. Apparently this was due to the National Arts Council having over-allocated the funding they had available. In addition, the funds which were meant to be paid out to these beneficiaries, were delayed and in some cases, reduced amounts were promised but no payments were received. (By end of March, the NAC announced that they had paid out less than a third of the promised R300 million, for projects which were meant to happen between January and March 2021.) This meant that many artists used their own resources to try to complete projects on the ground, but were then out of pocket, and worse off than if they had never applied for the funds in the first place.

In addition to the above, there were clear indications that certain Council members were recipients of funding from the PESP, despite this being in defiance of good governance processes and of South African administrative law. There was also evidence of corruption where certain individuals had applied under cover of different organisations and had been awarded funds several times through devious means.

This debacle so enraged South African artists and creative practitioners, led by Sibongile Mngoma, that they occupied the NAC offices in Johannesburg on 3 March 2021 and have remained there for over a month. They have been calling for transparency and accountability to counter this evident misappropriation and mismanagement of funds. Sibongile Mngoma is a world-renowned opera singer, who has been at the forefront of several initiatives over the past year to hold government to account, and to find support for the entire cultural and creative sector. However, the creatives all came to the sit-in as individuals from different backgrounds. They do not represent any organization, federation, union, or political party. Their main aim is to speak in one voice and get the best results for all creatives.

There has been wide-ranging solidarity support for their efforts from a number of South African organisations, including Im4theArts, SAUCCIF, ASSITEJ SA, Drama for Life, Forgotten Angle Theatre Company, Tribuo fund, and individuals such as world renowned choreographer, Gregory Maqoma and theatre veteran, Sello Maake ka Ncube. Well-respected arts administrator, Ismail Mahomed recently dedicated his award to the protestors after his trip to the French Embassy to receive the Chevalier de L'Ordre national du merite.

Last week the National Arts Festival took the NAC to court for illegally changing their contract and won the case, forcing the NAC to pay them in full and setting a legal precedent. There are also other court actions being taken on behalf of beneficiaries, whose outcomes are pending. One of these is being led by ASSITEJ SA to the Cape High Court.

### **Why is this urgent?**

We are at a crisis point. The artists sitting-in have been ordered to leave the NAC offices with no answers provided and there is a court order threatening to remove them physically from the premises on Tuesday 6th April. We need international press and international organisations to help, since the artists and creative practitioners are not being heard and they are now in further danger.

The current Minister of Sports, Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa, does not have a good record when it comes to the peaceful resolution of conflict. He held the position of Minister of Police during the Marikana tragedy, where miners who had demanded a salary increase engaged in protest action, leading to the Marikana massacre, as police used violence in retaliation. Recently a bystander was shot and killed by police at a Wits University students protest on the streets of Johannesburg not far from where the sit-in is currently underway. We see this therefore as an emergency situation.

### **What do we need from you?**

We ask you to voice your support for the courageous South African artists and creative practitioners who are attempting to hold our government to account for their failures.

We would appreciate a letter or short statement of support as soon as possible and for you to publicise this support through whatever means you have available to you.

If you use Twitter, and can post your support letter/statement there, we ask that you use the following handles to amplify your message so that it reaches our government: @nacsouthafrica, @SportsArtsCultur @PresidencyZA and #Im4theArts #ArtistsLivesMatter #CreativeSurvivorSA

Many thanks for giving this your attention. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on [director@assitej.org.za](mailto:director@assitej.org.za)

Warm greetings,

Yvette Hardie

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Honorary President: ASSITEJ

International Association for Theatre for Children and Young People