

Chairperson of TADA, Lesego Van Niekerk, Naledi Awards 2022 Speech

Good evening to you all – esteemed colleagues, fellow artists, co-workers and guests.

What an honour it is to be here tonight and address you in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Theatre and Dance Alliance or TADA as we are better known. My name is Lesego van Niekerk and I am very grateful to the organisers of the Naledi's who have given us this opportunity and this platform to speak to you tonight. From all of us at TADA, we'd like to congratulate all the nominees and winners and the Naledi organisation on this spectacular evening.

TADA was formed in 2021 as a reaction to the many needs of our artistic community that surfaced during the Covid pandemic. We are a members-based organisation that strives to advocate and lobby on behalf of all artists and co-workers that make up this industry. So far we have conducted an independent investigation into the National Arts Council funding debacle and produced a comprehensive report on this. We have drawn the Charter of Rights for South African Artists that underwrites our fundamental rights as encapsulated by our Constitution along with our sister organisations l'm4thearts and the STAND foundation, and we have advocated for the safe re-opening of our theatres and self-regulation within our sector in terms of labour practices.

We are extremely proud of the work we have done so far and the inroads we've made with government to see us as a legitimate representative organisation and a worthy adversary that has a grassroots foundation and truly speaks on behalf of its people. But tonight I am here to impress this upon you:

“Think not of what your industry can do for you, but what you can do for your industry”.

When it comes to being a representative organisation – there is tremendous strength in numbers and we would like to invite you tonight to join TADA as a member. This does not cost anything and signing up only takes a minute. Following us on social media is nice, but signing up as a member means you have access to our many programs and campaigns and you add in giving us the legitimacy we require to have a seat at the table, and to demand the respect and transparency that our sector and our members so deserve.

There is clearly a very deep level of misunderstanding, and a lack of compassion and professional care for this industry that has truly suffered because of careless and unscientific ideas of how our industry functions. We are so tired of making impassioned speeches (although I am giving it my best tonight). We are tired of listening to politicians and their concolences who tell us about the importance of the arts in a democratic society when their actions clearly belie this truth.

The turn of events over the last few weeks being the proposed amendments to the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the last minute extension of the National State of Disaster regulations and the seeming lack of guidance from the Department of Sports Arts and Culture have made us as the Performing Arts Sector wonder if we are truly now on our own.

But we are not alone. We have each other.

After a night like tonight, I am hopeful. And with the new policy proposal for the Theatre and Dance sector, Breathing New Vision into Theatre and Dance, there is much to be hopeful for. Even if half implemented, it will change the nature and sustainability of our sector. We have learned that we cannot leave it to government to implement policy on behalf of the sector. This is a moment when we need to inform ourselves and then actively lobby for a team of people from within the Theatre and Dance sector to drive this policy and its related funding strategies. TADA is just a vehicle to improve our sector. We need your membership, your voice and your active backing so that we can realise the full potential of contemporary Theatre and Dance in our country. A potential for world class performance that is accessible to and improves the quality of life for our citizens, many of whom live below the poverty line and who are thus excluded from enjoying this; what we do; what we offer. We know what it means to be poor, to be marginalized...noone is going to do anything for us, not even a R22 million 100m flag is going to save us. But as the Artists Charter declares, we are artists and we have rights. We have the right to our dignity, and to be treated at all times with dignity. We have the right to work and offer our labour in whatever form we choose, and we have the right to absolute freedom of creative expression. We have to fight for ourselves and defend our dignity and our work.

Please go to our website, TADA.org.za and sign up there.

As Dr Ismail Mahomed highlighted in his recent open letter to President Ramaphosa, Nelson Mandela was undoubtedly a wise man when he said "Artists reach areas far beyond the reach of politicians. Arts, especially entertainment and music, is understood by everybody, and it lifts the spirit and morale of those who hear it."

We are art and we matter.

Thank you.

Follow the QR code to sign up as a member of the Theatre And Dance Alliance:

