

Men Changing the face of Performance Arts in Namibia

For years, if not decades, the arts in have been considered the domain of women. At school, girls are encouraged to take up the arts and art related subjects, whereas boys are told to be the mathematicians and scientists of the future. This has now changed, with more men taking up performing arts in Namibia. Performance Artist and Researcher in Music and Theatre, Jacques Sakaria Mushaandja looks at male performing artists in Namibia, how they have changed the scene and how male performing artists can change society.

Dancing, acting, singing and many other forms of performance arts have always been considered as leisure and extra mural activities in Africa, and were mostly performed by women. They have been regarded as nothing else but pastimes that people do for entertainment and socialization purposes. A person that choses to follow a professional career in the performing arts is often confronted by several societal stereotypes. For many years, singers, dancers and even actors have been labeled by their communities as prostitutes, vagabonds, alcoholics, pagans, poor and even less intelligent, to mention but a few. Moreover, any men that chose to be performers suffered from societal pressure to do something 'better'. For both women and men, being a performer could hardly earn any respect, particularly men had to take on a recognised occupation such as technical work or even becoming a doctor or lawyer. Although this kind of pressure still exists in our African context, it is slowly but surely changing. As a Namibian artist, I can confidently state that our country has given birth to some talented and fervent male performers who have managed to endure and survive these pressures and many other challenges that come with being an artist.

It is a fact that the arts industry, like many other industries in our country, is awash with men who are not only a small pool of artists who have a gift and passion for their craft but are also committed to being socially responsible artists. Artists like the legendary and late Jackson Kaujeva who gave socio-political messages in their music should be celebrated. Amongst these few artists are people like musicians Elemotho and Big Ben, actor and poet Keamogetsi Molapong, and the award winning actor, theatre director and playwright David Ndjavera. I am sure that it wasn't easy for these creative minds to convince their families and communities that this is what they were destined to do and that they could still excel at it as men. Yes, the industry is full of male figures but how many of them actually understand the role and the power that they have in the overall development of this country? How many of them present socially conscious material with the aim of making people think and change their negative behavioral patterns? How many of these male artists are willing to come out of their comfort zones by staging content that challenges themselves as men and the nation?

It is important to say that these men have paved the way for other men to fearlessly and confidently pursue careers in performance arts. And not only that, they have and they continue to make a meaningful contribution to society through their work. Initiatives such as the Free Your Mind Stand-up Comedy and First Rain Dance Theatre Company are brilliant examples of male efforts that continue to make evocative contributions. I am however cognizant of the fact that the arts are a challenging career to take up, for the reasons described above and economic reasons too. Also, artists tend to be a different and unique kind of people from the rest of their society. We think and behave differently by nature, and society has always in a way victimized anything or anybody that it doesn't perceive as 'normal'. This is why I think it is time for our people to open our minds and encourage more male stage performers who are determined to bring change through their work. Like they say, performance is therapy and pedagogy for both performers and audiences, so a lot of men in our society might just starting changing into the type of men that society wishes to see, if we encourage this viewpoint.