

South Africa's Smart Theatre: Empowering Township Creators with AI, VR & Immersive Storytelling

South Africa's Smart Theatre empowers township creators with AI, VR & immersive storytelling, transforming local narratives for a global stage.

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- For decades, South Africa's townships have driven cultural revolutions—from the protest theatre of the apartheid era to the rise of Amapiano. But while these movements shaped global culture, the artists behind them were often left behind, without the tools, funding, or platforms to fully own their narratives.



SodaWorld and ACT team preparing the Theatre

The Smart Theatre Immersive Lab is a platform created to remedy this inequality. The collaboration between [SodaWorld](#), the Arts & Culture Trust (ACT), the South African Department of Sport, Arts & Culture and the City of Ekurhuleni is housed in the Dumisani Masilela Theatre in East Rand, Johannesburg. The initiative aims to transform the local community with tech, equipping locals with a live broadcast system, immersive technology and workflows using Artificial Intelligence. In South Africa's townships, stories have long been told through music, movement, and spoken word. Now with the Smart Theatre, these griots and storytellers can reach out to global audiences virtually.

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Empowering township creators with cutting-edge tools, we're bridging local talent to a global stage through innovation and storytelling”

Michael Balkind

“True virtual storytelling makes us more

connected—through distance, through digital space, and through the real-time presence of a

global audience.” says Pule kajanolintji, local rapper, linguist, heritage specialist and virtual performer. Pule is a frequent performer at SodaWorld’s events and has seen firsthand how these virtual spaces can bring African storytelling to the world. What began as an experimental studio in downtown Johannesburg during COVID-19, has now grown into a globally recognised platform.

SodaWorld has gained international recognition with work featured at MIT’s Reality Hack and the Venice Biennale’s Immersive Film Festival. In 2024, SodaWorld launched a first of its kind music festival as a proof of concept for their formula. The [Road to Amapiano](#) happened at the historic Constitutional Hill in central Johannesburg as well as in a ‘digital twin’ of the site in virtual reality (VR). This digital twin was a 3D model of the venue that was attended by festival goers in video game avatars in VR from around the world. It’s hard to wrap your head around for those unfamiliar with VR. “Imagine being in your living room, closing your eyes and then being at a festival with a live performance on a stage. That’s the experience of putting on a VR headset.”, says Michael Balkind, SodaWorld’s eclectic creator. The virtual world for the Road to Amapiano was a hit with more than double the number of attendees than there were in person. The 2500 virtual attendees tuned in from places as diverse as Tokyo, London and Boston.

SodaWorld’s success has been in creating a space for artists to merge tech and performance. For Michael, the Smart Theatre program puts underrepresented local artists' representation in their own hands, “The power to control one's own narrative is especially important in historically marginalized communities, where representation in media has often been dictated by outside forces.” Pule elaborates, “The most important thing is the potential for people to create their own identities, in any virtual space, you are in charge of how you present yourself. Everyone becomes an artist. We don’t have to wait for someone to discover us—we are building our own stage, our own audience, our own future.”

The aim for the program is for students to literally have the ability to build their own stages. Beyond learning practical broadcast skills, like how to use the theatre’s robotic cameras to broadcast their live performances, students will also be introduced to ‘world building’ for VR. Using digital tools, students will create and make use of their own digital worlds, like the digital twin of Constitution Hill. These spaces allow for untethered imagination to make whatever kind of world you’d like. The screens that flank either side of the theatre stage allow for a ‘mixed reality’ experience where the virtual world in VR is then broadcast into the physical space of the theatre. Actors can act both on the physical stage and in the fantastical space of VR, blending reality.

The Smart Theatre’s program kicks off on the 18th of February 2025 with 40 students thrust into the deep end of these immersive technologies. Be sure to keep an eye out for these experimental and novel theatrical productions straight from Johannesburg’s creative source.

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