

Unfestival programme announced

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UJ Arts and Culture (Fada) has [apparently] 'announced' 'counterintuitive' as the 'theme' for its 'all-new' Covid-19 responsive **Unfestival SA** partnered by Business and Arts South Africa (Basa).



“Why counterintuitive? Because very little makes sense right now,” explains Pieter Jacobs, head of UJ Arts and Culture. “By its very nature, a festival of nothing makes no sense. Festivals are celebrations of traditions, cultures and things we love. But Covid-19 came and turned everything on its head. Hence, our theme and a festival, which are not a celebration but rather a tribute, memorial and perhaps even mourning for many of the things we love, of which the pandemic has robbed us,” he says.



From left to right: Lakin Morgan-Baatjies, Pieter Jacobs, Annali Dempsey and Jade Bowers.

Leading a week-long lineup of un-events is ***Silence: A Grand Night For Nothing***, which marks the absence of UJ's annual Dean's Concert, *A Grand Night for Singing*, from the faculty's planned programme for this year. Established by Professor Federico Freschi, the former executive dean of Fada, in aid of academically deserving but financially needy students in Fada, the concert has served as an opportunity for audiences to support the academic journey of the youth. You can still do that by buying even though the event cannot take place this year.

Balambile, conceived and curated by multi-award-winning creative Jade Bowers, is about Covid-19 medical materials, goods shortages, food parcels, artists' relief grants and an irate middle class complaining on Facebook about the lack of designer masks readily available for purchase, for when they take their dogs and children on their Level 4 walks between 6am and 9am. "I didn't really have to do anything. But that is what an Unfestival is about. The things that we can't do; but, more importantly, the things that we can," says Bowers. "So how about we complain a little bit less? How about showing up even if you can't, by maybe buying a ticket?" she asks.

Mona Lisa's Smile is not really an exhibition, but veteran UJ Art Gallery curator Annali Dempsey thought it was interesting that Da Vinci anticipated the technology that would be used in future pandemics. "For instance, he depicted a Mona Lisa wearing a gas mask, another with a latter-day medical mask and her hoarding objects similar to today's toilet paper. Some of the Mona Lisa's unkempt hairstyles and rounded features allude to hardships suffered by women during periods of the plague," Dempsey explains. "It is known that Da Vinci survived the bubonic plague in the late 15th century while living in Milan, Italy. Up until early 2020, what has been unknown is the effect these pandemics had on Da Vinci's portraiture," she adds. Dempsey, however, remains cryptic with regards to the form this work will take on the Unfestival programme, merely insinuating that "all will be revealed with *Mona Lisa's Smile*."

Breathe is a truncated reworking and post-modern digital reconstruction of Samuel Beckett's famous one-minute play, *Breath*. In the original play, a curtain goes up and then basically comes down. Not much else happens. It's basically an abbreviated version of *Waiting for Godot*. At less than half the length of the original, *Breathe* is a much more abbreviated version and is also not a play. (But don't let that discourage you from buying a ticket anyway.)

Saudade is a non-dance work, which explores feelings of longing, melancholy, desire and nostalgia, which are characteristic of the Portuguese temperament. South Africa is home to the largest Portuguese-African population. They are highly active within the South African community, both politically and economically. According to *SA History* online: "Portuguese expansion into Africa began with the desire of King John I to gain access to the gold-producing areas of West Africa. The trans-Saharan trade routes between Songhai and the North African traders, provided Europe with gold coins used to trade spices, silks and other luxuries from India." This piece has absolutely nothing to do with this complicated history, but all of us feel the kind of longing, melancholy, desire and nostalgia encapsulated by this beautiful and unique Portuguese word – so buy a ticket already! (We promise it will make you feel better but remember to stay home and feel nostalgic by yourself.)

Stil is a 48-hour, uninterrupted, sustained silent reading series by a collective of artists from the Free State, called Byl en Vuurpyl. This deeply intimate and disturbing digital work has never won any awards. Founder of Byl en Vuurpyl, Jaco Kotze, is also the chairperson of the Free State chapter of the International Dyslexia Association (FSIDA), and explains that the piece was inspired from his experience as a child at school. "One of my teachers tried to teach me to read silently by placing a pencil between my lips and forcing me to read by myself in an empty classroom. *Stil* aims to evoke that experience for the audience," says Kotze.

Gag(ged) was inspired by something said in a social media post by a well-known comedian, creative director and one-third of a comedy powerhouse. What do cancelled and postponed events mean for the business of comedy in South Africa? Who is this comedian? Where was this social media post? What did it say? Does it matter? Does any of it matter? What matters most to you? (Buy a ticket and contemplate these and other questions all by yourself.)

An online work by another unknown artist, **Ndilindle** is an un-experience, about the annoyance and frustration of being stood up on a first date, being stranded at a taxi rank or, perhaps, waiting in a doctor's room for an appointment with a doctor who no longer works at the practice (see, you made your booking online). "Translated from isiXhosa (on Google!), the word *ndilindle* variously means 'I am waiting', 'my friend' or 'I hope'. "If we got the translation wrong, please let us know and sincere apologies in advance. We weren't expecting to present this groundbreaking experience this year but given the circumstances, we couldn't delay an opportunity for you to not be disappointed. Please purchase a ticket, because it's for two really great causes. Go on, do the right thing, even if it's annoying," says Lakin Morgan-Baatjies who heads up marketing at UJ Arts and Culture.

Rounding off the programme is **Psych: Escape from Reality**, moderated by Swiss celebrity curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist, presented by and featuring two famous guest speakers who will Zoom in from their permanent residence at Westpark Cemetery. The University of Johannesburg is at the forefront of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and artificial intelligence (AI). Through unique processes, the dead will be brought to life to present their papers and Obrist, in the form of a hologram, will moderate. This un-event is so advanced you would have to be in the matrix to experience it. (Tickets are going at a steal, so why not buy two?)

Unfestival SA runs from 26 May to 6 June 2020 and is a symbolic concept in aid of the UJ Fada Dean's Bursary Fund and Business and Arts South Africa's artist relief efforts. Visit www.arts.uj.ac.za or www.basa.co.za for full programme details. Bookings open on Thursday, 21 May 2020. Show your support by buying a ticket – but please don't come.

About UJ Arts and Culture

UJ Arts and Culture, a division of the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (Fada) produces and presents world-class student and professional arts programmes aligned to the UJ vision of an international university of choice, anchored in Africa, dynamically shaping the future. A robust range of arts platforms are offered on all four UJ campuses for students, staff, alumni and the general public to experience and engage with emerging and established Pan-African and international artists drawn from the full spectrum of the arts. In addition to UJ Arts and Culture, Fada offers programmes in eight creative disciplines in art, design and architecture, as well as being home to the NRF SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, and the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre. For more information, please visit www.uj.ac.za/arts.

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