

Celebrating five decades of theatre excellence

 By Eugene Yiga

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Fifty years ago, the Three Leaf Awards had six categories and 17 productions. Now, five decades later, the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards honoured excellence in theatre by dishing out prizes in 18 categories to 74 eligible productions.

"It's an absolute privilege for me to preside over the 50th Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards," said Melanie Burke, chairman of the adjudicating panel. "We've done a lot of work in rewarding and acknowledging excellence in theatre in South Africa, and especially in the Western Cape."

Around 1500 guests attended the 'vintage celebration' red carpet ceremony at Cape Town's Artscape Opera House. Christopher Weare, winner of four Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards and recently retired Associate Professor of the University of Cape Town's Drama School, directed the show, with comedian Alan Committie as a nimble master of ceremonies for the sixth time.

The entertainment line-up included veteran actor Andrew Buckland exploring the history of theatre; University of Cape Town graduates (including Sive Gubangxa, who went on to win the Most Promising Student award) performing a version of Hamlet for YouTube audiences; the Eminent band with lively music; Not The Midnight Mass singing a poignant Celtic song; Figure of Eight Dance Collective in a range of styles; and slam poet Koleka Putuma dreaming of a world that appreciates the arts.



"This year, our golden anniversary, presents Distell with an ideal opportunity to look back at its unique role in the growth of South African theatre," said Irma Albers, Distell's Arts and Culture Controller. (The Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards is a flagship arts and culture initiative of the Distell Foundation, which also supports mentoring, training and skills-development initiatives. These introduce youths to theatre and nurture talented directors and theatre makers who are entering the theatre industry.)

"Today we live in a democratic South Africa where everyone has the right to dream," said Richard Rushton, Distell's Managing Director. "Distell helps to preserve that space in which the arts can flourish because we believe that the arts is a catalyst for social transformation; that the arts helps people reach out and connect. Through the arts, we express our wishes, fears, hopes, and love. Throughout our country's history, the arts have given us a safe place to bear our souls and to transcend boundaries, differences, and obstacles of our everyday lives."



The focus of the evening was on the actual awards, each of which comes with a silver medallion and a R15,000 prize. And while there wasn't a single dominant production, as was the case last year with prison drama *Rooiland* and madcap musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, one of the evening's big winners was Louis 'Uncle Loo' Viljoen.

He took home the Rosalie van der Gucht Prize (for new directors) and Best New South African Script (for his political drama *The Kingmakers*). "I just won now," Viljoen said when collecting his second award. "I don't know if you saw me? Now I can pay my rent for the next four months!"

Viljoen's explicit psycho-drama *The Pervert Laura*, also nominated for its script, won Emily Child the award for Lead Actress in a Play. The award for Lead Actor in a Play went to Albert Pretorius for his performance in *Playland*, which Athol Fugard describes as the most emotionally exhausting play he's ever written.

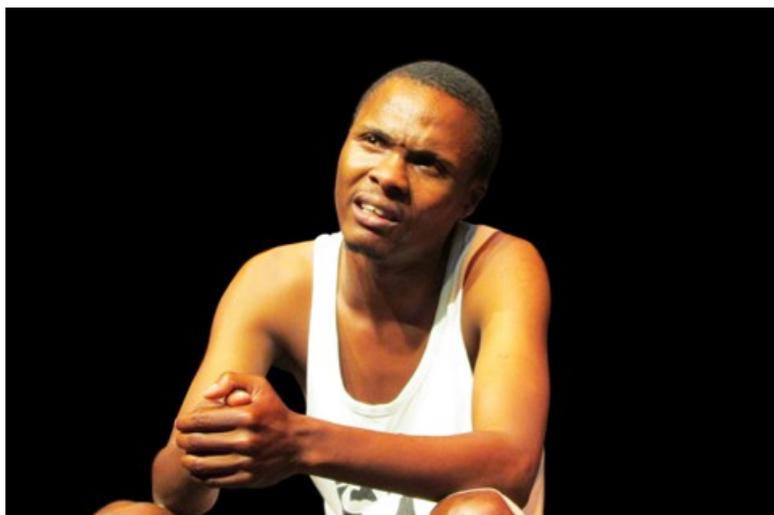


Rondomskrik, a play about the gruesome rape and murder of 17-year-old Anene Booysen in 2013, won awards for

Supporting Actor (Richard September) and Supporting Actress (Lee-Ann van Rooi). Both performers also won awards at the recent kykNET Fiëstas: Best Up-and-coming Artist for September and Best Supporting Actress for Van Rooi.

Khayalethu Anthony's performance in *The Champion*, a play exploring the impact of fatherless homes in the townships, won the award for One-Person Show. As was the case with last year's winner (Philip Dikotla in *Skierlik*), *The Champion* also won the Best Production Award at the [Zalabaza Theatre Festival](#), an annual showcase of emerging talent that runs at the Baxter Theatre from 21 to 28 March this year.

"When I got the news of my first nomination for the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards, I wrote a speech," Anthony said. "But then I didn't win, so I didn't write a speech again. Put this on Facebook; this goes in the records: the boy from Khayelitsha won!"



The Sound of Music, a R28 million production that toured abroad with its local cast, topped the list with seven nominations and won Janelle Visagie the award for Best Actress in a Musical or Music Theatre Show. On a smaller, but no less memorable, scale was medieval comedy *Fergus of Galloway*, with Sne Dladla (recently seen in David Kramer's *Orpheus in Africa*) winning the award for Best Actor in a Musical or Music Theatre Show.

Prizes were also awarded in technical categories. *Slowly*, a play about four princesses debating their fate as invading barbarians approach, won Best Costume Design (Leigh Bishop). *Fishers of Hope*, inspired by the haunting documentary *Darwin's Nightmare*, won Best Set Design (Patrick Curtis) and Best Sound Design (Nceba Gongxeka as live musician). *Balbesit*, which used rugby as a metaphor to explore men's desire to be heard, won Best Lighting Design (Wolf Britz) and Best Director (Jaco Boucher).



Marthinus Basson, a University of Stellenbosch lecturer whose introducer remarked has "reinvented the magic of the

stage", won the Lifetime Achievement Award. The Cape Town-based Handspring Puppet Company took home the prize for Innovation in Theatre, with its production of War Horse winning the award for Best Puppetry Design.

Since its creation in 1981, the company has participated in the creation of over 16 productions, presented in more than 30 countries around the world. In 2010, it established The Handspring Trust for Puppetry Arts, with premises in the informal settlement of Vrygrond (near their Cape Town puppet factory).

As [the website](#) explains, this non-profit organisation aims to identify, mentor, and champion the next generation of puppetry artists through workshops, academic engagement, and the support of ongoing projects in rural areas and townships.

"Few people have an award for puppetry, so thank you for this," said artistic director Adrian Kohler and executive producer Basil Jones. "Puppetry is an ancient art, but only recently are we beginning to understand how unique and powerful it is. New plays now get to see the light of day and enjoy a long life across the world. We are hugely grateful."

Disclosure: Eugene Yiga is one of 15 independent judges on the panel for the Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards. He took part in the audited process of selecting winners and nominees.

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ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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