

“Great ideas can come from anywhere” - Ryan McManus

By Leigh Andrews

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Native VML played an impressive role in putting a spotlight on African creativity at the global Cannes Lions 2017 Festival of Creativity. ECD Ryan McManus shares his highlights.

Just under a month ago Jason Xenopoulos, CEO and CCO at Native VML, served as both jury member for the Cannes Entertainment Lions and on-stage presenter along the likes of music greats Ellie Goulding and Wyclef Jean on the Cannes Lions Entertainment Inspiration stage.



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Xenopoulos was by no means musically outnumbered though, as his presentation on the topic of African creativity included Native VML ECD Ryan McManus as well as Melanie Campbell, head of marketing at Pernod Ricard SA as well as Khuli Chana, star of the Absolut One Source campaign that picked up a Gold Lion for Lions Entertainment as well as two Silver Lions in Lions Entertainment and Lions Music for Entertainment, with a Bronze Lion for Lions Media.



Cheers! Native VML ECD McManus with Pernod Ricard SA marketing director, Charl Bassil in Cannes.

All the more noteworthy when you consider the Native VML won its first Cannes Lions – gold, silver, and bronze – just last year, despite Xenopoulos having attended for the past 15 years.

Here, McManus – also on the Cannes Lions' Young Directors' Awards jury – elaborates on his Cannes Lions 2017 experience...

■ ***Start us off with a recap of your winning work on the Absolut One Source campaign.***

Every drop of Absolut comes from one source – a single aquifer in Sweden. Our challenge was to make that relevant in Africa. We thought there was an amazing overlap with Africa being the cradle of humankind. It literally is the birthplace of humanity; the 'one source' of all creation.

When we look at the world around us, filled with a lot of divisive rhetoric, travel bans, xenophobia and so on, we thought it an important message to put out into the world that we are all connected. That we are all bound together as human beings. And that the things that unite us are greater than those that divide us.

In an African context, it was also important to put this out in a way that's not derivative of anything, that has a local voice and identity. Not another global copy and paste. From the outset we wanted to create a piece of popular culture rather than an ad campaign. So we set out to make a concept album, a music video, and some short documentaries that help to tell this story and express this idea.

■ ***When did you know you had a big winner with this campaign?***

I don't think about whether a project is a winner or not in an awards sense when making it. But this project felt like we were doing something special from the moment we came up with the idea, to the meetings with Khuli, and through to the actual production. I always get super excited when a new idea is born and I remember the moment this one came to life and sort of seeing the whole thing and thinking, "Wow, if we can pull that off it will be amazing".

It felt the heart of the project was in the right place and we had created a construct that would give us freedom to make something challenging and rich. It was such an enjoyable and creative process, and that always shows in the work. Everyone that came on board sort of fell in love with the project and that's when you really feel that it's something special.

■ ***How important was collaboration on this work – in particular with Egg Films' Sunu Gonera and brand ambassador Khuli Chana – and more than that, in bringing SA to the forefront of the globe's creative stage?***

It was an incredible team that brought this project to life. Starting with our clients at Pernod Ricard who really gave us the license to push this as much as we did.



#CannesLions2017: "Africa is the birthplace of creativity" - Melanie Campbell

Leigh Andrews 17 Jul 2017



In terms of production, Sunu is just an amazing director and I loved every minute working with him and producer Kerry Hosford. I think the passion that we all felt for this project really made us continue to interrogate everything and keep creating and pushing at every step of the way. And it was such an enjoyable, rich collaboration.



#CannesLions2017: "This is who we really are" - Sunu Gonera

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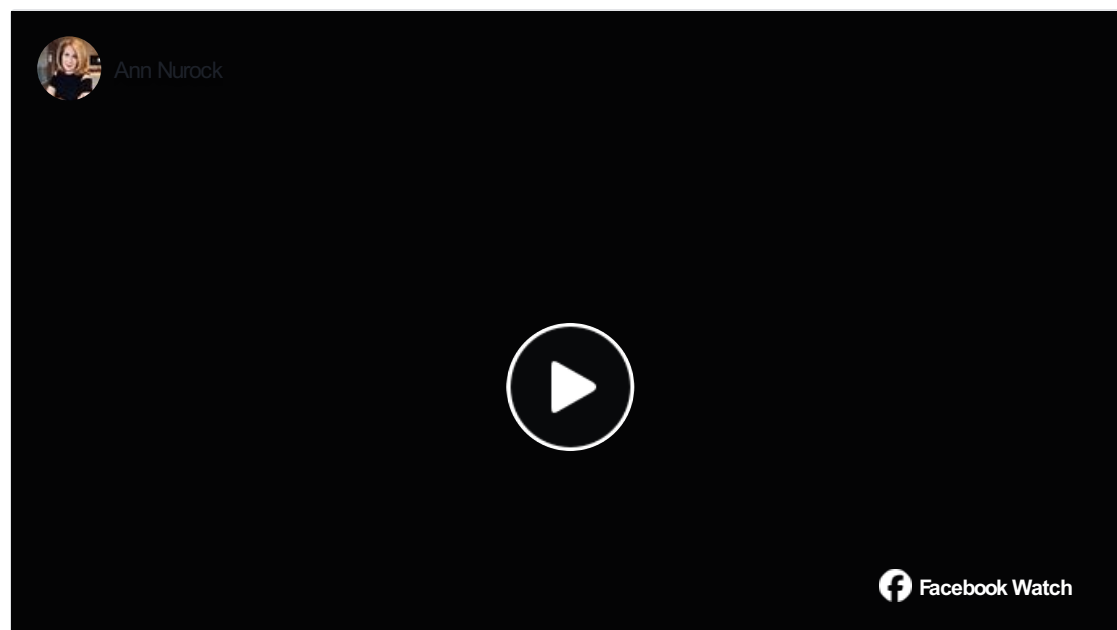


We had many nights on the shoot, staying up late, re-imagining what we were going to shoot the next day, pushing

ourselves to make it better. Everyone felt all-in.

Khuli is also a fantastic artist to work with, and it is not an usual brand ambassador relationship where we pay for tweets or a face of the campaign. It really is a creative collaboration with him.

When we went to Ghana to shoot, the song wasn't even done. We had no lyrics and the shoot ended up inspiring lyrics, and the locations inspiring ideas, so it was a real kind of multidiscipline collaboration, creating and reinventing on the fly.



This kind of collaboration has to have the right ingredients, but also the right level of trust and belief in each other, and the freedom to make changes as you go.

Of course everything still needs to be true to the story and the brand. So we worked hard upfront to create a kind of personal compass for the project for everyone to understand and work off and this way people who played a part, deeply understood what the message was, and then could express it in their way, in their own words. This is how we ended up with films and music and lyrics with the essence of the brand so deeply baked into the content.



The producers' wrap: Ryan McManus of Native VML

Leigh Andrews 23 May 2017



What was also important about this project is that it shifted the needle in terms of sales. The Absolut brand size has doubled in two years. Sales increased by 84%. So it's exciting and important to see how creativity directly affects the brand's growth and market share.

■ ***On the topic of greenbacks – literal cost aside, what's the benefit of attending Cannes for agencies and marketers alike?***

Well, Cannes is a significant investment for SA companies, with the distance and exchange rate. But it is also a hugely valuable experience, if you turn it into that.

The exposure to great minds and great work is priceless. We often end up putting ourselves in a box with how we approach a problem, how we say, "Ah that won't work in South Africa," and Cannes really helps to lift that invisible ceiling off and open your mind up to limitless creativity, to remind you that great ideas can come from anywhere.

The conversations with other creatives and marketers from around the world are also important to see how they solve similar issues and understand different ways of thinking.

Cannes allows us to peek into the future and see which way the industry is moving as whole, what's being invented, what new tech or platforms there are, how someone found a new way to bring a story to life, and to just immerse yourself in all of this.

That said, if you are going to Cannes just to party, it's a waste of money. The beer (and rosé) is much cheaper in SA!

■ ***So we hear! Elaborate on Native's involvement in Cannes Lions 2017 beyond just the winning work to include your judging and what this brought to the overall Cannes experience.***

I was invited to judge the Cannes Young Directors Award, which was a great opportunity and experience. That was significantly shorter than the actual Lions judging, which is a gruelling five to six day process that Jason thoroughly enjoyed.



Dan Mace becomes first South African to win three Young Director Awards at Cannes

Egg Films 26 Jun 2017



Any judging experience in Cannes is fantastic to have. I think the chance to meet great, talented people from around the world and discuss ideas is always super exciting. To discuss and dissect ideas, storytelling, craft, and when you're actually looking at different, new work from around the world that can lead to some very passionate discussions and opinions. It's just a great way to expand your horizons and interact with people. And some of those people you really do remain connected to.

It was also awesome to see some local work get recognition in the Young Directors Awards with [Janette de Villiers](#) and Dan Mace, as well as SJ and Nina Van Rensburg of 7Films all getting awarded.



#CannesLions2017: "Intimidating, out-of-this-world work" - 7Films

Leigh Andrews 7 Jul 2017



■ ***Flipping the script from what SA learned at Cannes to what Cannes learned from SA, explain your Cannes Entertainment Lions talk and how it was received.***

Our talk and panel discussion was really about contextualising where Africa is as a marketplace and why, where we've come from, and the importance of localising global brands. We tried to shine a light on the creative renaissance that's going on across the African continent and spoke about the opportunity for brands and business here.

We used the Absolut One Source project as a case to help articulate that. Khuli also did a live performance to end it off, which was fantastic.

The feedback we received was amazing! I think the global audience hasn't really seen much stuff like this, so it was quite a different kind of thing to showcase. I was a little worried that the project as a whole might not be received well or resonate with a global audience, but the response to the talk and the One Source project in general have both been incredible – from people based everywhere from Sweden to Brazil and Italy to the US, which was amazing to see.

■ ***Let's end with the aspect that probably got the least live coverage – the fact that #IAmMuslim placed third in the education category at the Act Responsible Exhibition at Cannes, and the importance of work that actually makes a difference in the world.***

The Act Responsible Award is voted for by the audience at Cannes, which as you can imagine is a very media literate and critical one. It's kind of like a giant judging jury, so we were really thrilled to see this piece of work not only win an audience vote, but also be exhibited in the Cannes Palas Auditorium. This campaign is still talking about an important and relevant issue that should be spoken about more, by more people. So I was really happy to get even more eyeballs on this piece of work. The piece that came first in this category was [Fearless Girl](#), one of the most awarded pieces in Cannes this year, so I was happy that our piece was even considered by the audience to be in the same league as that.

As are we – keep shining the light of SA creativity, Native VML! [Click here](#) for McManus' MyBiz profile, [here](#) for the marketer's perspective on this specific campaign and be sure to follow Native VML's updates [on Twitter](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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