

Reconnecting the Working Class the Jozi Book Fair Way

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The youth should be provided a space to learn and also teach each other and this serves as a way to prevent them from joining in dangerous activities. But this is not the case in the majority of townships and working class communities in South Africa so many youths have become addicted to substances and involved in crime.

The Jozi Book Fair (JBF) however is trying to counter this by building a space for the youth to be active in different cultural courses programmes. The main idea behind the JBF's Cultural Programme is to expose the talent amongst the youth and empower the youth with skills. This is achieved through popular education methods. The programme is aimed at youth from all around Gauteng, including the Johannesburg innercity, Daveyton, Thokoza, and Soweto.

On 30 April, the JBF hosted the first Cultural Programme event at the Workers Museum. The day was broken down into two parts with the morning session being parallel workshops on chess, poetry, drama, visual arts and music, and the afternoon session being for open mic performances. The purpose of the open mic session is to showcase the different talents in the working class and explore other ways of teaching and raising awareness through art, like reciting poems and through beautiful songs.

The event was the first of many to come. Different facilitators coordinate the teaching and learning process in the different workshops and the participants get a chance to experiment in their different workshops. Some of the facilitators include: cdes from the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Makhosonke Mrubatha, Belita Andre, Siyabonga Mviko, Masai Dabula, Lawrence Simelane from Perfect Storm Productions and cdes from the Blah Blah Brothers Production.

Participants in the poetry workshop had the chance to write poems and later got the chance to perform at the open mic session to showcase what they learnt in the workshop. The participants in the music workshop experimented with the different kind of sounds and got the chance to turn them into music. Participants in the chess workshop were given an introduction and then a chance to play against each other.

While most of the performers at the afternoon open mic session did great in their performances, one group of young girls, the Reateka traditional group in particular caught the eye of the crowd with their traditional dance routine. It amazed the crowd how a group of children had worked so hard and how very talented they were. The Reateka traditional group did not only steal the crowds hearts but also got newly-lino-printed T-shirts as an impromptu prize.

The JBF held the second Cultural Programme event on 21 May 2022, with a similar structure as the first one. The workshops had facilitators that not only taught certain skills and techniques but also encouraged the participants to be engaged in the teaching process. The participants took part in different exercises, ranging from vocal warm ups in music, dance routines in theatre, and stream of consciousness in poetry.

The open mic incorporated in and out of school youth and the performances were very different but also showed some similarities in that they spoke to the issues facing the youth today. This was especially true for the two plays that were performed. One was

about the youth's visiting a museum and learning about the history of South Africa and the other was about Gender-based Violence (GBV) in our communities.

Though they carried different messages they both however held up the working class's problems to the light. The issues of the collapsing education system and GBV are issues that the working class is faced with everyday and when given the space, it's clear that the youth will passionately express their views on the current issues through different art forms.

What was interesting about the Cultural Programme events is that different age groups of the working class were able to come together and learn more ways to empower themselves. The age gaps turned the event into a memory lane and also a place of discovery as many older people remembered how they used to participate in cultural dances. For the youth however it was amazing to learn new things, especially from their age mates.

Lawrance Simelane (32), one of the theatre and dance facilitators, shared his experience at the event and also about the different things he learnt from the event and from the participants that were part of his class. Simelane explained how they fully expressed themselves with passion and how they also taught him, particularly with how they engage and ask questions in the session.

Simelane intends to engage with more and more youth through the Cultural Programme so they can have a project that builds up to the JBF Festival. He hopes that some of his works can reach different parts of working class communities to encourage them to join in the cultural work of theatre and performance.

Siyabonga Mviko (35), the chess facilitator, explained broadly about the importance of having this programme and his role as a facilitator. "The programme is going good. I see it as a revival of working class culture which has really took a dive. Importantly it's an intervention that hopefully extends far and wide and is taken into schools too because what the education system has done now is to collapse all the extra mural and cultural activities."

Lethukuthula Dlamini (19) was part of the participants and was also a performer from two groups based in Daveyton, Umphembe the Shadow and Black Rivers. Dlamini said he feels very excited to have ventured into such a programme. The groups he's involved in keep him rooted in cultural works but he would also love to explore more with different organisations like the Jozi Book Fair.

Dlamini says he sees the Jozi Book Fair as one of his bigger goals because he hopes to one day be part of the facilitators or possibly a scriptwriter in one of these programmes. Dlamini sees the programme as a stage to learn more about his craft and a space to highlight his mistakes to later improve in his craft.

The event also had the Bathekgi book stall selling affordable books mainly for children and a tuckshop. The book prices ranged from R20 to R150, which is very affordable for the working class considering how books are usually expensive and unavailable to the working class.

The JBF's Cultural Programme is a good place for the youth to learn and broaden their art and craft and the JBF will continue to provide spaces for the youth to learn and teach.

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