

Constitution Hill Celebrates Human Rights

By Jozi Book Fair Team

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The Constitution Hill hosted its 5th Annual Human Rights Festival from 25 – 26 March 2023 at the Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The event takes place annually to celebrate Human Rights Day. The Festival included dialogues around various books, a film festival, music, poetry and a book fair. Some of the discussions were around migration, climate crisis, inequality and challenges in the publishing space.

Saul Molobi, the curator of the Book Fair said, ‘the Festival is to honour those who fought for our country and our democracy’. Throughout the Festival he also made emphasis about the Festival being the voice for the marginalised.

This event and its location are a representation of South Africa’s journey to democracy and where we are now 29 years after democracy. Looking at the number of NGOs present at the Book Fair showed that there are many different initiatives to deal with injustice in this country and the Festival itself aims to highlight various social justice violations that continue to affect people under democracy.

“There is no justice, from apartheid to democracy, we are not enjoying the freedom that many struggled for, we are still oppressed,” said Nkosinathi who was attending the Festival.

The Human Rights Festival brings together various organisations that deal with social justice so that the public can engage with them. These organisations included Khanya College, International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), Green Peace, Foundation for Human Rights (FHR), Equal Education (EE), Three2Six, Bright Spark Foundation SA, Saving Lives and many more. These organisation deal with different aspects of human rights, including education, human trafficking, research, climate change, rights for immigrants, and rights for sex workers etc.

There were a lot of youth and families with children. The programme was exciting and looked at issues such as climate justice and jazz, and small authors also discussed the challenges they face as self-publishers and the poor buying culture in South Africa. It was also very interesting to see young people who have written their books and were selling and engaging with people about their journey as young writers.

Small publishers were given the platform to sell their books. This included Bridge Books, Bathekgi Ba Khanya College, Khwezi Books, Inspired Publishers, Profounder, Mbali Khurisa Creative Foundation and more.

The Festival also had food stalls and handmade clothes, bags and jewellery on sale. While some of the sessions planned did not take place, the Festival was fun and a good space for networking and engaging different organisations and people who are trying to change the world in different ways.

The class composition of the audience (and perhaps even class orientation) of the Constitution Hill Human Rights Festival was largely middle class, which is a common phenomenon in South Africa where book fairs and literary festivals are often a space for a predominantly middle-class audience. This is a bit disappointing considering that the working class is the one who bears the biggest brunt of inequality and injustice in South Africa. Yet this event did not draw many working class people as its audience, and perhaps was not very accessible for most.

Despite this being a Human Rights Festival, xenophobic movement Operation Dudula took the opportunity to march at the Festival on the Sunday of the Festival (26 March), promoting their xenophobic ideologies and the violation of the rights of immigrants who live in South Africa. They chanted loudly as some members claimed that Chapter 9 of the Constitution does not favour nor represent South Africans, only immigrants. One of the Operation Dudula leaders in the march opportunistically blamed 'foreigners' for the problems facing the country.

This was a big contradiction, considering what the HR Festival represents and what Operation Dudula stands for. People had different opinions about why the event organisers let Operation Dudula march at such an event. Some felt they should have been removed as they started the march, while others felt like a Human Rights Festival is the perfect place for them to march as it is their constitutional rights to march and voice their opinions.

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