

Challenging times call for creativity - Q&A with Lamees Albertus of The Fugard

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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General manager and producer of the iconic The Fugard Theatre in Cape Town, Lamees Albertus, shares her #LockdownLessons, how The Fugard and the SA theatre and arts industry, in general, is navigating and responding to the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent nationwide lockdown.

■ What was your initial response to the crisis/lockdown and has your experience of it been different from what you expected?

My initial response to the lockdown was very supportive. The crisis at the time seemed short-term, to me, and I was confident that I could use the time productively to rework schedules and get a good head start for when the theatre could safely open again.

Over the course of the lockdown, my confidence and creativity was and continues to be, challenged by the amount of Covid-19 cases growing rapidly day-by-day and the dire situations other countries around the world are in at the moment.

With The Fugard's dedicated team and the positivity of the arts industry in South Africa, I remain motivated to plan and find solutions.



■ Comment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the arts industry or economy as a whole.

The pandemic is in the process of crippling the arts industry around the world.

Artists have lost work. Contracted staff have lost work. Theatres are closed. Audiences will perhaps not be confident to visit the theatre until there is a vaccine – and we don't know when that will be.

Everyone is trying to survive with the limited resources available right now. We all need to work together to get through this. All artists and theatre-makers need to appeal to the government to support our creative sector.

■ ***How is The Fugard responding to the crisis and current lockdown?***

We are all working from home at the moment. Lots of Zoom planning meetings – knowing that plans will constantly change as our shutdown levels change.

With the uncertainty around the virus and release of a vaccine. Everyone is speaking of a 'new normal'. We are all trying to discover what this means for us, in the hope that our business can survive through these challenging times.

We are already discovering some very exciting ventures, which we are currently researching and hoping to roll out over the next few months.



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■ ***What sort of assistance will you need going forward?***

Our loyal audience's support. Support is all one can ask for. Through sponsorships, donations, watching and interacting with the Fugard and the online platform we are releasing digitally in the coming months.

■ ***Comment on the challenges and opportunities.***

The Fugard has two business arms – a theatre venue and a producing house. Over these two business arms, we aim to create an experience for an audience.

While people cannot and will not gather for their safety in many months to come, our theatre venue and auditorium spaces need a complete rethink while we are in lockdown.

For the past 10 years that the Fugard has been in existence, we have produced predominantly for the stage. We are now reworking that approach, to offer online content for audiences to access.

■ ***We are working on ways to minimise our risk to business and staff.***

While these are unprecedented times, challenging creativity beyond what we thought was possible before, we have always been open to new challenges. Yes, this challenge is scary, but together we will find a way to keep the theatre going.



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■ ***How has the lockdown affected your staff? What temporary HR policies have you put in place regarding remote working, health and safety, etc.?***

With the uncertainty around when we will be able to operate again, we have had to announce a cancellation of all on-stage production for the rest of 2020, cancelling contracts of 108 actors, designers, crew and suppliers. This has been one of the hardest calls to make in my career as a producer and now as general manager as well.

We have all Fugard staff working remotely at the moment – via Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, etc. The team has been incredibly enthusiastic and supportive with new ideas for the months to come.

Security at the Fugard has been equipped with thermometers, masks, hand sanitiser and gloves. Security and staff have been briefed accordingly about restrictions and protocol for needing to enter the building for essential work and maintenance.

Cleaning teams are doing regular cleaning and sanitising surfaces.

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ICYMI, we announced an extension of the free stream of our production of Athol Fugard's "MASTER HAROLD"... AND THE BOYS to 20 May for Friends of the Fugard Members! □ □ Not a friend yet? Sign up on our website and get the password to access the stream! □ □ #MasterHaroldSA □ □ (Photo by Claude Barnardo)

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📌 **How have you had to change the way you work?**

I am an office body. I prefer working in the office because I find it productive, with access to staff in an open-plan setting.

Right now, I have set up a remote office at home, but with the pressures of urgent change and proposals, and the easy access to my home office, I don't switch off at all right now. It has been stressful.

Beyond physical spaces, I have had to change the way I think and plan. I am a planner and like to have solid plans in place, based on factual information. This virus is forcing me to adapt on the fly by going with things on a day-to-day basis.

📌 **Has this global crisis changed your view of the future of the arts?**

It has raised very serious concerns, however, I still do not think that it is the end of theatre as we know it forever.

Theatre has been around for thousands of years. It has developed over time, but the basics have always remained. For me, this is an opportunity for development with the times. These tools will help us in future when people are allowed to gather and theatres are allowed to open. But it will not be able to replace being fully present with a group of tangible, living, breathing people forever.



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📌 **Any trends you've seen emerge as a result of the crisis?**

Lots of virtual work is popping up everywhere. We are busy with this as well. To stay relevant and try to generate some income, staying in touch with the audience is important.

📌 **Your top tip for staying sane during a lockdown?**

Be mindful and grateful for all that you do have.

📌 **How do you hope artists and performers, and humanity in general, can come out of this pandemic better and stronger?**

For one, if we come out of this alive and healthy, then we have already won.

We all need to come out of this with more compassion for one another and appreciation for what we have. We can only hope that after this crisis, our work will have adapted and continue to stay relevant.

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

Ruth is the production manager at Bizcommunity. ruth@bizcommunity.com

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