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## Ampersand Commercial Arts Studio

*Let the Athenæum be your muse.*

All the greats had a special place they would work from: Roald Dahl had a genuine Vardo caravan from which he issued forth some of his most beloved stories; Agatha Christie, meanwhile, would dream up intricate plots of murder and heroism while eating apples in the bathtub.

For us Soapbox boys our personal creative oasis is the beautiful, Victorian-Era, Athenæum building. And what's more, we'd like to share our creative wellspring with you.

"We are essentially offering an open-space design studio for rent to a select group of talented freelancers who are looking to up their game," says Ampersand Commercial Arts Studio Director Reino Erasmus.

"Just as the Soapbox (which is Ampersand Studio's flagship publication) is an affordable developmental tool for entrepreneurs; so will the studio's environment be that enabling catalyst for creative freelancers."

The Ampersand Studio concept has been in development for more than a year alongside the Soapbox. It wasn't easy, and we often had to work hard to overcome many obstacles. While we managed to pull through every time, we used to think to ourselves: 'there must be a better way to do this'. So we did what we always do: we built a set of tools to help us get the job done more easily.

During the course of our development, we discovered that the lack of a formal office can of-

ten lead to the undervaluing of your work by new clients. Let's face it, trying to pitch a project in a noisy coffee shop isn't the most professional of approaches. Also, the lack of a formal business social environment in a home office makes it hard to stay disciplined. (Informal Soapbox studios have shown that it's extremely hard to get work done when Adventure Time is on TV).

Biting the bullet and starting a bespoke studio that oozes confidence is expensive, as the capital outlay needed is eye-popping. Ampersand Studio offers the talented freelancer the opportunity to take part in an inspiring and creative environment set up amongst a modern and powerful infrastructure, at minimal cost.

"Our objective with Ampersand Studio," says Reino, "is to build a high-functioning collaborative working environment based on mutually supportive social creativity. Freelancers who come on board have the option to expand their market share by accessing a pool of complementary skill sets." Hence the studio's name 'Ampersand', as it thrives on social interactions between 'you and I'.

200 years ago, 'Athenaeums' spread across the globe to house creative interest groups such as philosophers; artists' collectives; poets; early photographers and other creative communities. For us the Athenaeum's modern re-interpreted, classical architecture is the coolest, most conducive place for creativity in the whole of PE. Basing the studio within its walls was a no-brainer.

Athenaeums were created because for centuries, thinkers and artists have understood that creativity is an elusive beast that has no master. It can, however, be coaxed out under certain conditions. Ambience and Milieu, for example, are two often overlooked factors for stimulating purposeful inspiration, especially in the modern workplace. They are factors that Reino is keen to cultivate.

"A workplace must inspire you to want to achieve new heights, professionally. It must not just be a place where you plug your laptop in and grind

away until it's time to go home. Starting off as freelancers, both Greig and I understand that it takes more than 4 walls and a desk to get you motivated and active. We are building a supportive, creative environment where professionalism and high-quality output are the norms."

It wasn't just the history that made us want to be a part of the Athenaeum. The Athenaeum is made up of a series of art galleries; workshops; a coffee shop and numerous studios, and of course, the Little Theatre. All of these spaces are booked up well in advance and host the activities of some of the most interesting and dynamic artists in the Eastern Cape.

From being the hosting venue for this year's Design Indaba; to the launch of the 'Wish You Were Here' initiative (see the back cover for more on this exciting venture), the Athenaeum almost always has something intensely interesting on the go. Ampersand Studio is literally surrounded by extremely motivated and talented creatives at just about every hour of the day. How could you not be inspired? The mood and excitement is contagious and incredibly infective.

"I feel that a big problem we have in the City," said Reino, "is that we subconsciously hold ourselves back. We are constantly comparing ourselves to

bigger cities around the country, often unfairly. Things don't seem to happen in PE, because we passively sit back and bemoan the fact that nothing exciting ever happens to us, instead of getting out there and becoming the change we want to see. And because we take a 'sit back and wait' attitude, we become less open to new ideas and fail to support local and visiting artists and entrepreneurs. And because artists and entrepreneurs who try to bring something new to PE aren't supported, they either leave or don't come back. And then nothing happens! It's a vicious circle of our own making. As a City we are too wrapped up in our own comfort zones to see past our noses."

"That's why we founded Ampersand Studio, to do what others dream of and to have a huge amount of fun at the same time," said Reino. "We are putting out a call for prospective, talented freelancers who are interested in becoming a part of Ampersand Studio's network. If you think you have what it takes, contact us and we'll be happy to meet with you."

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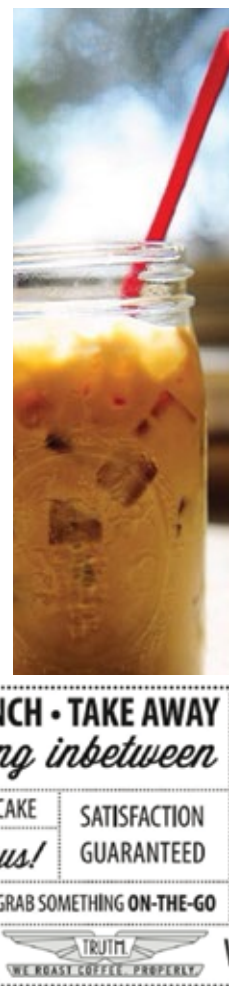
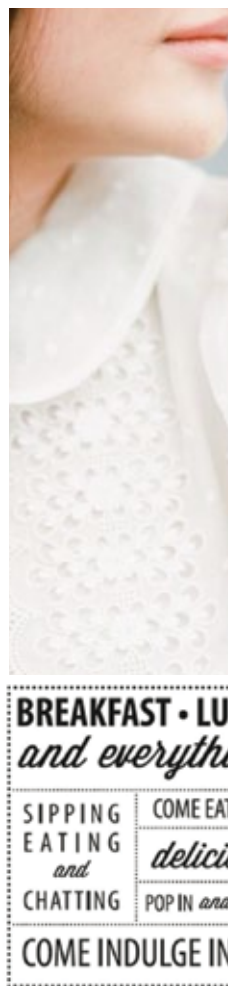
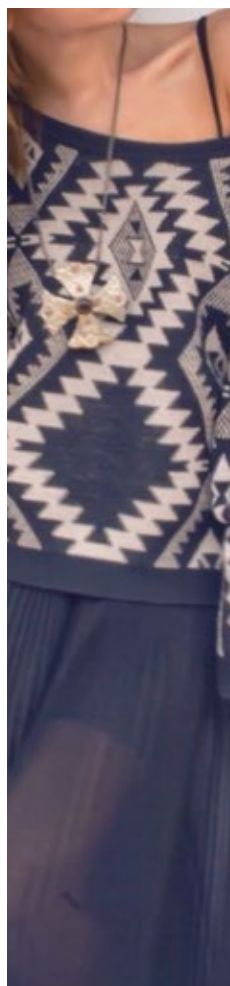
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## Theatre Review: The Veil

by Amy Shelper.

Zwai Mjijima is not afraid of complex content. He takes it and makes it cannon fodder for deep and dark societal analysis. Sure, there are light moments – in the unbearable lightness of being kind of way – but mostly his plays focus on the visceral and raw.

The Veil is no different. In it Mjijima peeks behind the pale gossamer that separates African from African, South African from Somalian. He transports us beyond the liminal space that separates customer and shop-keeper as he journeys with Ali (Anele Penny), a Somalian émigré seeking refuge in South Africa.

Having fled war – and the murder of his mother and brother – in the North African country, Ali is

liberated by the freedoms on offer in South Africa. Here he establishes a shop in a Port Elizabeth township through a network of fellow Somalians – and finds love in an unlikely place and person.

Nosipho (Zinathi Ngcwangu) challenges all his world and cultural views while winning the most important battle, for that of his heart. Joy and abundance enter his world for the first time – and he experiences a hope he has never known before.

But there is little room for love when you cross African borders – real or imaginary – and the two fall into a cultural chasm that tears them apart and ends in their tainted, uneasy resignation in favour the cultural status quo. A submission devoid of hope, fouled by love, but immersed in the reality of South African life.

The performances by Penny and Ngcwangu are course, tinged by an unrefinement that makes the production all the more stark.

The Veil is powerful, gritty, raw and rewarding – it is accurate a glimpse into love, loss and failed cultural defiance. It's a true South African story embedded in the painful and powerful now, cutting to the heart of the complexity on the continent.





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# For Tomorrow

## *Behind the scenes of NMMU's very first TV advertisement.*

Very few adults will get all teary eyed about how awesome Standard 9 algebra was back in the day, and how much they miss it. Let's face it, education isn't very sexy. Yes, it's very, very necessary, but for most of us, formal education was a drag. Which is a pity, because education is a fundamental part of life which is meant to enrich our existence. It is there to help us make better sense of the world, and to be able to interact and navigate it to its fullest extent.

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University had a difficult task at hand: how do you change the public's perception of what is perceived to be a mundane necessity?

The result is the most riveting 30 seconds of television ever produced locally.

We sat down with Andrew MacKenzie of Boomtown, the agency responsible for this bold cinematic commercial. Andrew is their Creative Director and he feels that this groundbreaking commercial is proof that Nelson Mandela Bay has what it takes.

"The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University has a particular brand position," explains Andrew. "It centers around the fact that they are fulfilling the hopes and dreams of young people. After all, their strapline is: 'For Tomorrow'. The whole idea behind the advert is to show people that there is a possibility of realizing and achieving those dreams, that with NMMU they are only a moment away from realizing those big dreams they have."

Andrew and his team decided early on to steer clear of the traditional visual cues normally used to depict higher education in order to stand out from the crowd.

"We didn't want to follow in the footsteps of other Universities. You know what I mean: images of students in a lecture hall studying; the beautiful campus or people with scrolls throwing their mortarboards up into the air."

We are living in an age where so many new streams of media are vying for our attention. Social media platforms have become just as important (if not more so) as traditional broadcasting channels.

"Brands nowadays have to stand out from the crowd. It must build an emotional connection with the audience in order to be effective. Our ad is centered around building an emotional connection. It is about having the audience drawn in to the ad, for them to develop a feeling that the person on screen is going to do something great."

The 30 second ad does much more than just inspire, it is concrete proof that the Nelson Mandela Bay has the skill sets in place locally to compete on the global stage. "Everything was done in-house in the City for this project," says Andrew. "It was fantastic! The music score was produced by a local musician who wrote the score and put it into the background of the advert. None of the actors in the ad are professionals, all of them are local. In fact, most of them are NMMU students," says Andrew with a smile. "Even all our locations were local. The athletics track was NMMU's athletics track and the scene with the architect was filmed at Coega."

"I am a graduate of the University, and so are many of the guys working here at Boomtown. Rooftop productions was another local powerhouse that collaborated on this commercial, and was responsible for the production elements of the commercial. Both Richard and James from Rooftop are

NMMU graduates. It's really special where you can actually find a component where people who have studied there are now able to do work to promote their institution."

The entire production team had many obstacles to overcome. Many of the solutions were quite charming in a way that could only have been thought up here in PE. "Television commercials are incredibly expensive. We're talking millions of Rands. We had a shoestring budget to work with and had to find a number of innovative solutions to some of the problems we faced."

"We had to do this tracking shot at night. Now usually you would have a dolly with a set of tracks running parallel to the subjects you want to film, which will make for a smooth tracking shot of the sprinters in this particular scene. We had to use what we had, so we ended up with a cameraman on a custom built trailer pulled by a 4 wheeler riding alongside the sprinters. For something shot on such a rough and ready platform, the footage the guys got back from it was incredible."

The ad has also been adapted for radio. "The script was written as a TV ad and then modified to radio. Needless to say, it became more important to be used on radio when we heard we were going to be able to use John Kani's voice. His is the main voice in the TV ad. He was born in Motherwell and he was given an honorary doctorate from NMMU, so it was fantastic to use an actor of his stature with such an awesome connection to the institution and the City! It was translated into Xhosa as well and was flighted on national Xhosa radio stations as well as flighting on national radio in English."

"It was a long process of client engagement. You have got to have brave clients who want to do great work, so compliments to the University on their side. They were prepared to back our concept and follow through with it. I think the commercial is going to position the institution in a really good way."

"This it the first time that the University has made a commercial for television. They've never played in this space before. The institution has made a decision that they need to start competing on a credible level with rival institutions. So with this ad, it makes a statement that it is competing directly against some of the top South African universities."

NMMU has been very savvy in how it has re-branded itself. "What we've got to remember," says Andrew, "is that NMMU doesn't have the heritage that UCT and Stellenbosch has. When compared to them it is a brand new institution, because it is a newly merged institution. In fact when the University was merged the initial vision for the institution at that stage was to show the world that it was going to be the first truly African University. An integrated institution that really spoke of the democracy of this new country. And it also carries the name of Nelson Mandela! It's a major thing to carry that integrity forward. They exude his values as part of the University as they've adopted a lot of his values internally."

"I firmly believe that Nelson Mandela Bay underestimates itself. Like NMMU, we have the ability to compete on a national and international level very easily. Boomtown is doing business out of this City for national clients every day. We operate out

of Nelson Mandela Bay because of the incredible lifestyle we are able to enjoy here. Port Elizabeth is a fantastic city to live in."

"The expertise is here and homegrown. Rather than lose that amazing talent that we have we need to further develop a creative industry that will allow us to retain that talent. Because everyone leaves, it's like a talent drain on the City. Everyone seems to go to Jo'burg and Cape Town and there's simply no excuse for it. Developing and investing in our local creative economy is vital. What you must also bear in mind that it is in the competitive arena that the best work is done. It keeps everyone on the cusp of great work. I think that all these little design and hothouse agencies that are popping up is a very good thing for the City."

"As a consequence of the work we do, we have the fantastic luxury of a few words on a piece of paper as a brief. Our clients will say to us 'come up with a solution for us to achieve this particular objective'. And now you sit on your couch in the evening, and you see your ad being broadcast on national TV. There is something tremendously rewarding about that. It started off as just an idea, a spark of inspiration scribbled down on a layout pad, that was brought into this world and made real. It turned into to a fantastic ad that not only I, but that the whole City can be proud of. For me, that is a fantastic thing. Not only for this agency but for everyone who worked on this project."

Watch the advert here;

[www.youtube.com/NMMUonTube](http://www.youtube.com/NMMUonTube)



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# Tanya Poole

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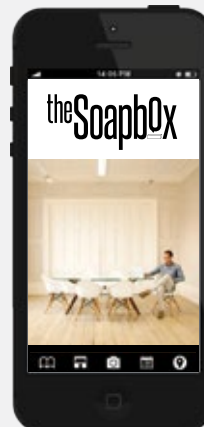
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*Anthony Harris (artEC) and Cedric Vanderlinden (Underculture Contemporary)*

# Breaking Art Stereotypes

*Cedric Vanderlinden on the “Wish You Were Here” project.*

Here's an interesting social experiment to try: Stop a random stranger and point to a map of South Africa. Ask them to point out 'where all the art is at'? Most people will point to Cape Town and some will point to Johannesburg. Close to zero will point to the space in between.

“I like to think of the empty space in-between as the modern equivalent of the ‘here be dragons’. To most, it’s ‘terra incognita’, unexplored territory.” explains Cedric Vanderlinden, Director of the Underculture Contemporary Art Gallery, located in Park Drive.

“I have to point out that things are beginning to change and that there are a number of art hotspots that are beginning to show up on the map such as Potchefstroom; Bloemfontein and Durban.”

I ask Cedric why PE seems to carry the stigma of being a cultural black hole (i.e. no light escapes and everything gets sucked back in).

“I personally believe that places like Cape Town and Johannesburg have cultural identities that link them more closely with other international centers. The rest of the country tends to be a mix of agricultural and industrial centers.”

“I think that historically South Africa saw itself as England’s poorer cousin, with whom it tried to keep up with and emulate. In agricultural centers such as the Eastern Cape, for example, there are large farming communities. So the vast majority of

artworks being produced were traditional English pastoral types of works. Works such as water-colors and landscapes.”

“Another factor as to why PE isn’t regarded as an art destination is because the money lies in places like Cape Town and Johannesburg. The Eastern Cape is one of South Africa’s poorer provinces, so you don’t have many art buyers coming through PE.” This does, however, feed into the misperception that you need to be rich in order to buy art.

“You certainly don’t have to be rich to buy art, and Port Elizabeth doesn’t have to be a wealthy centre to support the arts. We produce a plethora of high quality, affordable works right here in the City.”

But isn’t choosing to buy art in our current economic climate just a tad bit frivolous. “Not at all. Art is not decoration. People often confuse the two. Decoration merely fills empty space. A decoration is something that needs to be a certain size and shape and conforms to the color scheme of the room. That is the extent of it.”

“Art, however, brings warmth and character into a space. It evokes an emotional response and becomes something you cannot do away with. It transcends being a mere object or image.”

“Most will balk at spending R3000 on a piece of art. And yet they are perfectly willing to spend R300 000 or R400 000 on a third or fourth car. Something that they will use infrequently at best.”

Appreciating art begins with a connection, says Cedric. “The key to appreciating art is that it has to reach out to you on a very deep level. It starts with you going to galleries and seeing a work of art that speaks and connects to you on a very deep level. It must blow you away and be the thing that you run back into a burning building to rescue. That is the start of appreciating art.”

“Comparatively, paying R3000 for something that, for years to come, will fill your living space with warmth and character will be quite cheap. It will become something that will be used every day; cherished; and passed down to your descendants. It is something that will weave itself into your own personal history.”

Cedric and his fellow gallery owners (such as Anthony Harris of artEC and Bretten-Anne Moolman of Art on Target, to mention but a few) are the cultural vanguard of PE’s art scene. The “Wish You Were Here” initiative that they are spearheading, is at its core a marketing exercise for Port Elizabeth as an art destination.

“The world around us has changed substantially. We are producing art of substance and meaning. The kinds of stuff that people who are involved in the contemporary arts see and go ‘hey, wait a minute, there’s something here’.” explains Cedric.

“The problem is that the local public is unaware of these works, and the national public just hasn’t looked. The national public waits to ‘discover’ one of our talented artists in the major art centers like Cape Town or Johannesburg.”

He believes that the size of the City has nothing to do with our seemingly under appreciation of the arts. “Why do artists have to leave PE in order to make a name for themselves? Trent Reed, for example had a gallery in Knysna which has a tiny, tiny population when compared to the Nelson Mandela Bay, and yet it is very well established and well supported name.”

“Once Nelson Mandela Bay is known as a City with an Art Infrastructure, both buildings and a viewing public, it’s the artistic equivalent of a band saying: ‘Hey, we have fans of our genre in PE, let’s play there’. Artists will choose to bring their exhibitions to the City because they know they will be well supported and appreciated.”

“We want the public to develop a taste for good art. Also, if we offer a platform for contemporary local artists then at least they have the ‘home ground advantage’. We want to raise the profile of Nelson Mandela Bay, as well as raise the profile of artists who are from, and all about Nelson Mandela Bay. We want to get the City to show up on the cultural radar.”