

FUTURE FESTIVALS



SOUTH AFRICA

Future Festivals South Africa Report: Buyel'Ekhaya 2020

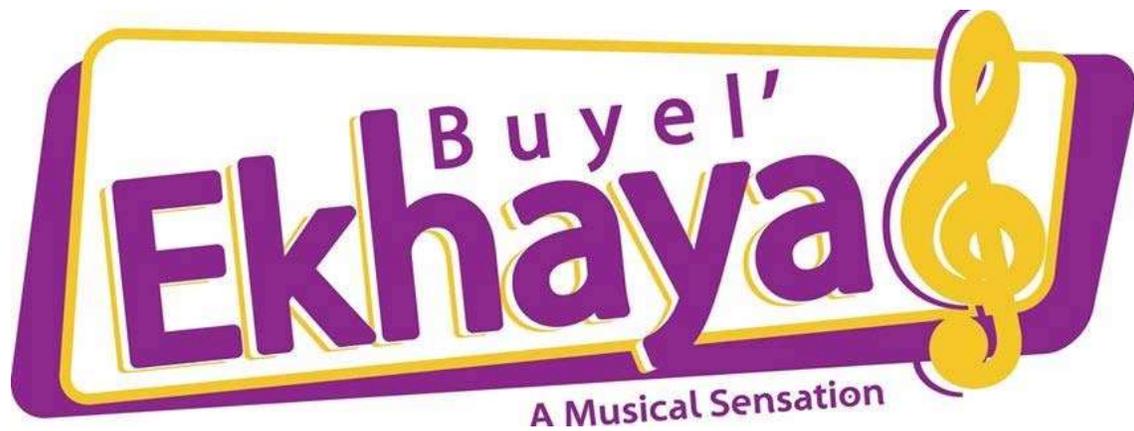


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Buyel'Ekhaya 2020 Report

Introduction

The Buyel'Ekhaya Pan African Music Festival started in 2009 and is held annually in mid-December in East London, Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape province. Aiming to turn East London into a “cultural mecca”, the festival supports and showcases musicians and fashion designers ranging from emerging artists in the Eastern Cape to nationally and internationally acclaimed South African and Pan-African artists. The festival usually offers a musical mix of afrosoul, amapiano, hip hop, house and gqom. Annual attendee figures are reported as being approximately 25 000.

Founder Nomahlubi Mazwai described the festival as:

“The crown of the Eastern Cape’s festivals, the 11th Annual [2019] Buyel'Ekhaya Pan African Festival celebrates all that is African, contributing to the maintenance of cultural heritage and diversity. It is foremost an African music festival that respects and embraces Pan-African culture as is evident in the line-up and attendee profile” (Buyel'Ekhaya, 2021).

The Buyel'Ekhaya Fashion Development Programme started in 2016 and is an empowerment initiative for young up and coming Eastern Cape designers. Starting with just 8 interns in 2016, it has grown significantly with 68 young designers participating in the 2019 2-day Fashion Development Workshop. Ten young aspiring Eastern Cape fashion designers won an internship with acclaimed South African fashion houses and created collections to showcase at the annual Buyel'Ekhaya Fashion Show alongside top designers from South Africa and Southern Africa.

Due to COVID-19 lockdowns in South Africa which prevented large in-person gatherings, the Buyel'Ekhaya organisers decided to pivot to a virtual festival in the form of a television broadcast which featured some of South Africa’s most prominent musicians.

The *Future Festivals South Africa* project conducted some research on Buyel'Ekhaya’s 2020 virtual festival edition. The research is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK and looks at how South African festivals have adapted to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Researchers from King’s College London and Rhodes University are collaborating on the project.

South African Festival Responses to COVID-19

Festivals have been one of the sectors most affected by COVID-19 globally. A recent national mapping study of the South African creative economy showed that the “Performance and Celebration” domain, which includes all live music, performance arts, and festivals, grew at a faster annual rate (3.4%) than the rest of the economy (1.1%) between 2016 and 2018 (SACO, 2020). Part of the work of the *Future Festivals South Africa* project is to track the impact of the lockdown and social distancing measures put in place, as well as the adaptation strategies used by festivals that did continue.

Of the 214 cultural festivals mapped, the largest groups were mixed Arts and Culture festivals (43%) and Music festivals (38%), with smaller numbers of Film (9%), Literary (8%) and Comedy (2%) festivals. Of the cultural festivals that occurred in 2019, only 115 took place in 2020 (see figure 1). Approximately half of the Arts and Culture and Music festivals that occurred in 2019 were cancelled due to COVID-19. However, Film, Literary and Comedy festivals adapted quite well to the COVID-19 restrictions by mainly pivoting to online “virtual” festival formats. With only 28 festivals having occurred before lockdown, adaptation strategies included having smaller COVID-19 compliant in-person live events (17 festivals), a hybrid (online and "live") event (7 festivals) or moving online to have a "virtual" digital festival, which was the most popular response (63 events) (see figure 2).

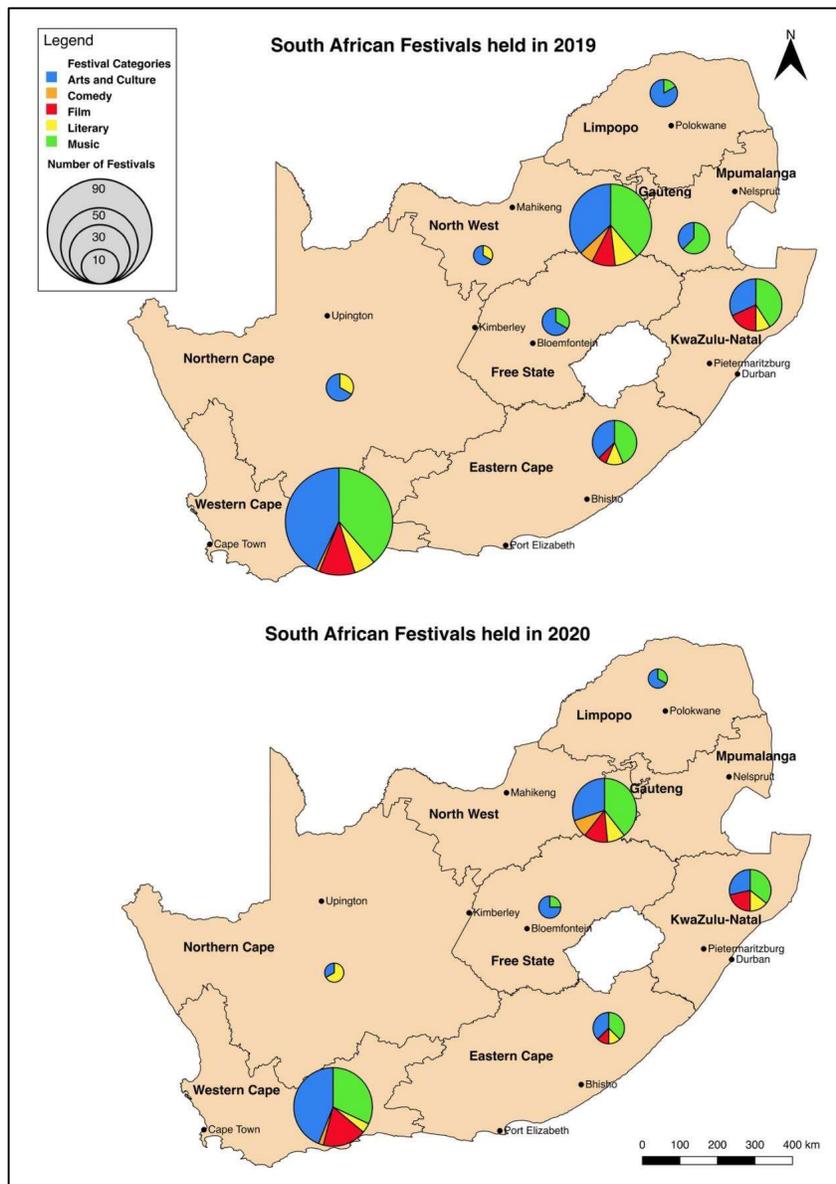


Figure 1 Comparison of South African festivals held in 2019 and 2020 by theme

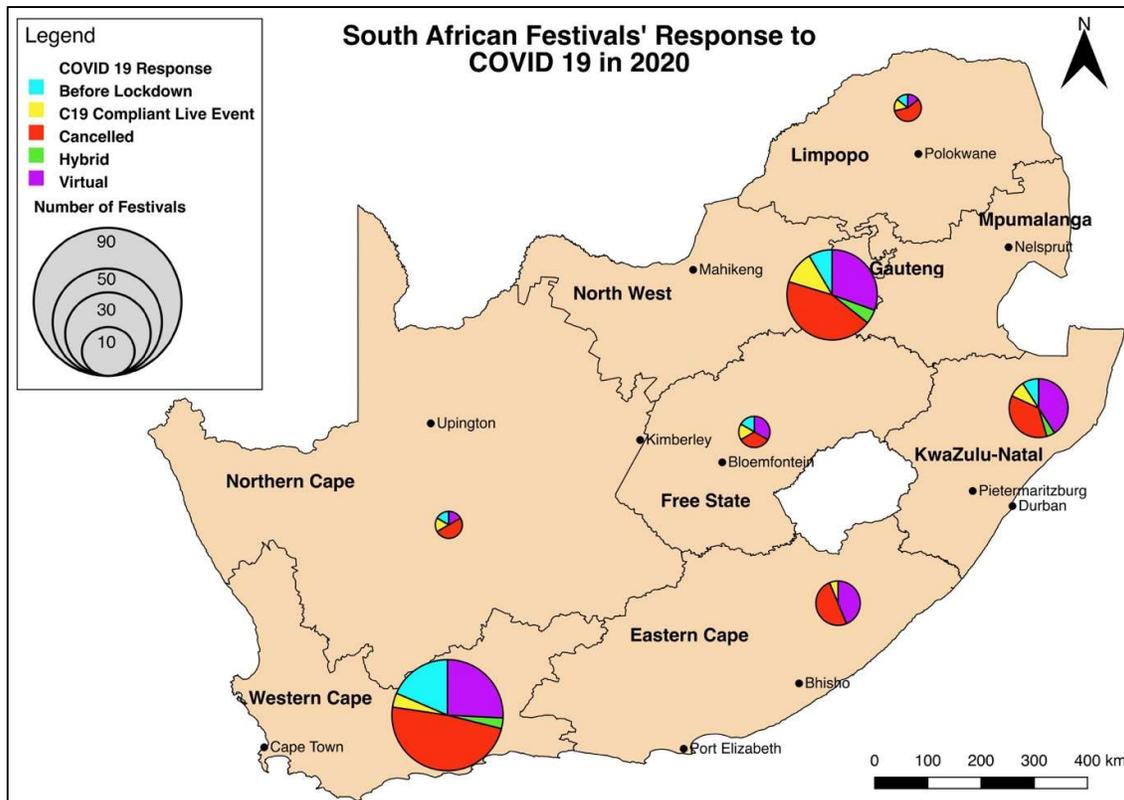


Figure 2 South African festival responses to COVID-19 in 2020

The Eastern Cape province which is home to Buyel’Ekhaya hosted 16 festivals in 2019 across festival categories of Arts and Culture (6), Film (1), Literary (2) and Music (7). Half of the Eastern Cape’s festivals were cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19. Of those that did continue, 7 festivals, including Buyel’Ekhaya, pivoted to a virtual format and one festival held a live COVID-19 compliant event. The television broadcast format chosen by Buyel’Ekhaya was also chosen by two other Eastern Cape music festivals. This was a unique response by Eastern Cape music festivals as other music festivals around South Africa also pivoted to a virtual format but through the online streaming route, rather than broadcasting.

Research Methods

Following the Buyel’Ekhaya virtual festival television broadcast, internet searches and an online interview with festival management were used to collect information. The internet searches and interview were conducted to gather information on the music festival and the fashion development programme in terms of previous events and the 2020 edition of Buyel’Ekhaya. Data collected related to marketing, audience response as shown through social media comments, and artists’ experiences of the televised festival production through interviews with news outlets. The interview investigated the organiser response to COVID-19 in terms of planning and implementation as well as lessons learnt and plans for the future, should social distancing restrictions continue. Buyel’Ekhaya’s televised music festival serves as a case study in the *Future Festivals South Africa* research into the adaptation strategies of South African festivals to COVID-19.

Buyel'Ekhaya's Response to COVID-19: A Televised Festival

"You can't come to Buyel'Ekhaya, so Buyel'Ekhaya will come to you. We want to give the audience the feeling of coming home to the festival, without ever leaving their homes." (Buyel'Ekhaya, 2020)

Buyel'Ekhaya adapted to the COVID-19 restriction by changing the festival format to a 2-hour televised festival performance, aired on 26th December and repeated on 31st December 2020. The production was hosted by Somizi Mhlongo as well as YouTuber Mhlali Ndamase and media personality Moshe Ndiki, who are both from the Eastern Cape. The festival's line-up is diverse in genre and with an eclectic mix of artists and fashion to incorporate both aspects of the festival. The performers include artists from the Eastern Cape as well as the rest of South Africa and Zimbabwe (see figure 3 for the performance poster). From hosts to performers, the commitment of the festival to showcase Eastern Cape talent remained strong in the pivot to the virtual festival format.



Figure 3 Buyel'Ekhaya televised festival performance poster

When it became clear that regulations would not be eased by December to allow for the usual live festival that attracts about 25 000 people, and nor would it be financially viable to host a COVID compliant live event with a limited audience of 500 people, Buyel'Ekhaya organisers made the decision to pivot to a virtual televised event. In part, this was motivated by the national Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, a major sponsor, declaring that cultural events would need to be virtual in order to go ahead in 2020.

The choice of adaptation, a televised virtual festival, took advantage of existing relationships with broadcasters as the festival had been looking to expand into television for its Fashion Development Programme and Living Legends of the Eastern Cape documentary series. Thinking around how to make the jump to a virtual festival with a television adaptation method was thus related to what was already in the Buyel'Ekhaya ecosystem.

Founder Nomahlubi Mazwai felt that it was important for the festival to keep up with the times and said the following about the 2020 virtual festival edition:

"We're going back to ingoma, from eKomga to KwaNongoma, every lounge eMzansi will be taken on a journey celebrating the amalgamation of our beautiful past with an exciting digital future. Given our commitment to our loved and loyal fans and the tens of thousands of people who journey to East London each year from all corners of our beautiful country for the festival, we have evolved to ensure that our brand gives our loyal fans an experience worth remembering. We invite the people of the Eastern Cape, South Africa and beyond to join us in celebrating the merger of tradition with technology and wisdom with youth as our country's musical superpowers take the stage to remind us of our colourful past as we step into the future. It's about coming together as family and friends. It's a momentous celebration of who we are as human beings and how our cultural identities have merged seamlessly with an exciting digital future, all in 2-hour magical music spectacular" (quoted in Kelleher, 2020).

When festivals all around South Africa were being forced to cancel, it was important to Buyel'Ekhaya's organisers that their festival go ahead to keep the brand alive and offer entertainment to their loyal fans while also expanding to new audiences around South Africa and sharing the Eastern Cape culture with them. The pivot to a televised festival was successful as Buyel'Ekhaya 2020 was watched by just over 400 000 people, thereby massively increasing their reach. This pivot to a televised festival has ushered in a new era for Buyel'Ekhaya as there are a number of new opportunities and festival possibilities open to them now that they have proof of concept (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

In making the pivot to a televised festival, it was important to consider their brand values and what they wanted to take forward into the future:

"So our whole festival is about cultural heritage. Our tagline was Buyel'Ekhaya Culture 2.0. It was about the amalgamation of the past and the future. Buyel'Ekhaya is a traditional brand of diverse African culture. You've got these beautiful binaries that you're exploiting, you've got your traditional and metropolitan, and now you go on to this virtual platform and you can really exploit those binaries and really give a varied expression of culture. Not because modern is better, but it's because it's a new reality" (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

Audience Reach

The television format of the festival was chosen to try and reach as many people as possible. One of the main aims of previous editions of the festival has been to keep ticket prices as low as possible so that people from all socio-economic backgrounds could participate, and access was thus a primary concern for festival organisers. Since data costs associated with online streaming are high and exclude many South Africans from accessing content, a virtual streaming event was not an option considered by Buyel'Ekhaya (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021). This is in keeping with the aims of the live festival as an inclusive and progressive event.

“In taking the concert into a virtual space and broadcasting it into homes across the country, we want to entertain and represent the existing audience and ethos, while captivating a new one” (Buyel’Ekhaya, 2020).

The success of Buyel’Ekhaya’s pivot to a virtual televised format is clear from their viewership figures. Just over 400 000 watched the two airings of the festival that were broadcast on DSTV in December of 2020. The switch to television thus increased Buyel’Ekhaya’s audience reach significantly as the live event is usually limited by the venue capacity (a stadium in Buffalo City) of 25 000 people. For some years, however, there has been an excess of demand for tickets to the live event, and a move to a larger venue has been recommended to expand the festival (Snowball and Keeton, 2015). In terms of audience share, 42% of viewers were based in Gauteng and only 11% were from the Eastern Cape where the festival is usually based. This also represents a shift in audience reach as a local Eastern Cape fanbase usually make up the majority of the live festival audience. The marketing impact of this is significant as festival management hope that they have captured a new audience from outside of the Eastern Cape who would be willing to travel for a live Buyel’Ekhaya in the future (Buyel’Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

Audience Reactions

Social media comments on the festival were generally positive with the announcement of the virtual festival and the line-up of musicians being met with enthusiasm and hundreds of likes and comments¹. There were also several comments from people requesting details of the rebroadcast as they were disappointed to have missed it. However, criticisms were levelled at the festival from what seems to be their core Eastern Cape audience base for not including enough Eastern Cape artists. There was a perception that Buyel’Ekhaya had moved away from their stated aim of showcasing local Eastern Cape talent and were booking big name artists rather than giving emerging Eastern Cape artists who have previously performed at the live festival a chance on a national stage. This negative perception may have contributed to the comparatively poor viewership (11%) from the Eastern Cape. However, Festival organisers felt that they had kept to their mandate as they highlighted Eastern Cape scenery and stories in the virtual backgrounds and booked two hosts and three popular artists from the Eastern Cape (Buyel’Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021). Although the Eastern Cape Tourism promotion department did not sponsor the 2020 festival, they did provide some video content that was included in the broadcast.

The festival received criticism from fans for choosing to broadcast the show on DSTV, a paid subscription service, rather than the free national broadcaster and for not having a free online streaming option available. There was a feeling that this excluded some people from accessing the festival content. This was a concern shared by the Buyel’Ekhaya organisers as they originally approached the national broadcaster with the televised festival concept. Unfortunately, the contract fell through at the last minute resulting in a need to quickly switch

¹ Buyel’Ekhaya’s social media that was consulted for this report includes:
Buyel’Ekhaya Music Festival Facebook https://www.facebook.com/BuyelEkhayaMusicFestival/?ref=page_internal
BuyelekhayaFestival Twitter https://twitter.com/Buyel_Ekhaya
Buyelekhayafestival Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/buyelekhayafestival/>

to a new partner if the festival was to go ahead in 2020. The high viewership figures showed that this was not a major hinderance as just over 400 000 South Africans tuned in to watch the show. The difficult decisions and trade-offs evident in the Buyel'Ekhaya case are a common theme for South African festivals that sought to pivot to new formats in 2020, especially those that sought to balance audience access with what was financially possible in economically constrained times.

Artist Responses

With cancellations of live events across South Africa, one of Buyel'Ekhaya's aims in producing the televised festival was to create employment for artists. Making the switch from live to digital recorded performance is not easy and to ensure quality productions, training on how to perform to a camera is necessary. In an interview with Mpiletso Motumi from IOL (2020) about Buyel'Ekhaya's virtual festival, Eastern Cape singer Ami Faku said "preparing for it is always different because it's a virtual experience and you have to sing to the cameras. I enjoy myself any time I get to sing, and appreciate these opportunities because things have been really tough when it comes to gigs. I always do the best I can. I know watching these performances on TV feel like a foreign concept but I hope the fans will enjoy it and see the hard work put into it."

Buyel'Ekhaya chose well established "veteran" artists who were already comfortable with the digital medium, to perform at the 2020 festival (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021). This meant that filming the festival went smoothly as the artists knew what they needed to do and no additional training was required. "They were very professional and they really enjoyed it. They participated in the social media campaigns, they really played out of their boots!" (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021). The gratefulness of artists to festival organisers who took the risk of continuing their festival in 2020 is also a theme found in other case studies in this research.

Switching to a two hour televised performance as compared to an overnight live event meant that changes had to be made to the usual artist line-up which Buyel'Ekhaya received some criticism for from their local Eastern Cape fanbase. With a limited time slot and a digital medium, fewer artists than for the usual live event were able to perform, there were no warm-up acts from emerging artists and those who were unfamiliar with performing for TV were not invited to perform. Other festivals also experienced such difficult choices, since new platforms demand new skills from both artists and service providers. .

Marketing

Due to the last minute change in television broadcasting partner and the time needed to renegotiate a contract, the marketing campaign for the festival was delayed. Marketing began in earnest only four days before the festival was due to air. Festival organisers worried that this would negatively impact awareness and thus viewership of the televised festival. This was not the case as television, radio and official festival and artists' social media advertising and promotion successfully generated awareness and excitement surrounding the festival (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

Artist buy-in to the televised Buyel'Ekhaya festival was crucial for the marketing campaign. The artists harnessed their social media to advertise the festival so that in the days leading up to the broadcast, individual artists who had announced that they would be performing were trending and on the day of the event, the festival itself was trending at number one (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

However, the festival did receive some negative publicity as there was some confusion on social media around whether the festival would be a live event in East London that would be broadcast to the rest of the country, or whether it was a pre-recorded virtual event without a live audience. Concerns were raised over the safety of holding a live event but festival management was quick to step in and assure people that it was a virtual event that had been recorded in COVID safe conditions (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

Financing and Risk

The live Buyel'Ekhaya music festival usually receives sponsorship from the national Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, Eastern Cape tourism bodies and provincial and local governments thanks to their contributions to culture, the regional economy and destination marketing of the Eastern Cape. In response to COVID-19, national, provincial and local government sponsorship for cultural events in 2020 was withdrawn or conditional upon being virtual. Buyel'Ekhaya therefore lost their main provincial and local sponsors and took guidance from the national Department of Sports, Arts and Culture to pivot to a virtual event and so retain them as a sponsor. The loss of sponsorship meant that going ahead with the pivot to a televised festival required a large private investment from Buyel'Ekhaya organisers who covered 30% of the 2020 virtual festival's budget. Self-funding 30% of the festival was a large financial risk but it was seen as a worthwhile investment into the future of Buyel'Ekhaya to keep the brand alive and ensure brand loyalty by not cancelling the festival (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021). In a number of other cases where South African festivals pivoted to online platforms, brand continuity was cited as one of the most important reasons for doing so. As in the case of Buyel'Ekhaya, this continuity often required festival managers to take on considerable financial risk.

Given that 400 000 people tuned in to watch the 2020 virtual festival, Buyel'Ekhaya have proven that this festival model can be successful and hope to use this to their advantage with renewing and creating new sponsorship deals so that the funding model of the festival becomes more sustainable, and the private investment can be recouped. For example, Buyel'Ekhaya believe that they have proven their worth in destination marketing as 89% of viewers were based outside of the Eastern Cape and were introduced to the province's "majestic tourist offerings" through stock footage provided by Eastern Cape Parks and Tourism that was projected onto large LED screens as the setting of the performances (Buyel'Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021). The virtual festival may have had a greater impact than the live event on destination marketing as more people were reached.

As festival organisers noted, “How you sell a TV show is completely different to how you sell the live event.”

A pre-recorded and edited musical festival for television involves a different set of processes, skills, equipment and funding models from a live event. Buyel’Ekhaya took a risk in pivoting to a televised festival in that it was a new experience to navigate with skills, production requirements and processes that needed to be learned. New teams and skills were brought in to help with the creative concept of a virtual festival, filming, post-production and marketing. As the experiences of other festivals has shown, the capacity of festival managers to adapt to new business models and platforms was a key determinant of their success in pivoting to new formats during the COVID-19 lockdown. The human capital and experience evident in the Buyel’Ekhaya team was thus a critical factor in determining their success.

The Future of Buyel’Ekhaya

Festival organisers remain uncertain about the feasibility of holding large scale, live events in 2021. The success of the televised 2020 edition of the festival, has shown that Buyel’Ekhaya have the potential to reach audiences through other platforms.

The success of the televised festival has left a question over the choice of businesses models for Buyel’Ekhaya. The televised event increased their reach from 25 000 people to 400 000 people, generated a marketing benefit for the Buyel’Ekhaya brand with links to potential sponsorship and marketed the Eastern Cape as a tourism destination. However, the locational benefit to East London and the Eastern Cape was, barring the significant tourism marketing benefit, lost. In an economic impact study of the 2014 Buyel’Ekhaya festival, it was found that there was an impact of R25.8 million on Buffalo City Municipality (Snowball and Keeton, 2015). This is a significant benefit to the area and it is important to the festival organisers to have a positive impact on the region through direct and indirect employment creation, spending and tourism. This benefit cannot be recaptured unless a live event is held as it is not currently possible to film and edit a televised festival performance in the Eastern Cape due to a lack of infrastructure (Buyel’Ekhaya, Personal Communication, 2021).

The separation of festivals from their physical locations is also a common experience of South African festivals that sought to move to virtual platforms. While potentially reaching new audiences and expanding participation, online or broadcast festivals no longer drive local economic development through tourism, and a return to this model may be some time away.

The question now arises as to the future of Buyel’Ekhaya in their choice of business model in whether they continue with a televised festival, return to a live event format or pursue a hybrid model of live and virtual events. These business models have different financing, marketing, production, economic impact and socio-cultural considerations which will need to be taken into account.

Conclusion

Buyel’Ekhaya’s virtual televised 2020 festival is a success story in South African festival responses to COVID-19. Though there were a number of challenges including having to

navigate a change into producing a festival for television, switching broadcasting partner at short notice, last minute marketing campaigns, financing shortfalls that had to be privately covered and critiques over Eastern Cape artist representation, the viewership figures of just over 400 000 people show that Buyel'Ekhaya successfully made the jump into the virtual festival format. Buyel'Ekhaya have positioned themselves well for the future with a number of business models open to them which include live and virtual elements.

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