

Theatre will remain but will need to recalibrate - Q&A with Fahiem Stellenboom of The Baxter

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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As part of our #LockdownLessons series, Bizcommunity is reaching out to South Africa's top industry players to share their experience of the current Covid-19 crisis, how their organisations are navigating these unusual times, where the challenges and opportunities lie, and their industry outlook for the near future.

Marketing manager of the well-loved Baxter Theatre in Cape Town, Fahiem Stellenboom, shares his Lockdown Lessons and how the Baxter 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.



FahiemStellenboom

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

I don't think any of us really anticipated the full extent and scope of how the lockdown would impact us when it was initially announced. I certainly didn't. Our concern for the economic impact was clear but, on so many other levels, it has been new ground for us. It has turned out to be nothing like I originally expected it would be. The experience has been surreal, often confusing, but, mostly, it has been a powerful time for reflection, introspection and cognitive thinking. And these have been important considerations for me during this time, to help make sense of it all on a personal level.

At the Baxter, we had just opened with David Kramer's musical, *Danger in the Dark*, and there were two more weeks left

before the season was to end. The production featured a cast and band of nearly 20 artists, as well as a production and technical teams. The Baxter honoured the contracts of everyone involved.

Other productions affected by the lockdown at the time included Tally-Ho Productions' The Last Five Years, the 55th Fleur du Cap Theatre Awards, Ayana/Afrika Ablaze's I am Rain, Ndumiso Lindi's Boys Don't Cry, Celeste Ntuli's Money and Men, Best of Zabalaza 2020, all Morning Melodies, South African College of Music, Cape Town Concert Series and Masambe Theatre performances.

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

The impact of this pandemic on the arts and economies is devastating, not only in South Africa but globally. The arts feed the soul and, at a time like this, its absence is felt deeply - as if spirit is lacking. From an economic perspective, we are reminded what a global village the world has become - an intricate, interwoven inter-dependence on which the capitalist system is based and thrives for profit. The extent of job and income losses is enormous and will continue to be devastating for artists and the sector.



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

Fortunately, the Baxter Theatre Centre is led by an incredible visionary and creative, CEO and artistic director, Lara Foot. While our doors are closed, like that of theatres all over South Africa and the world, we have been working remotely to come up with ways to secure our financial sustainability in the future. With Lara's leadership, we have launched our Baxter Coffee Angels campaign and our Baxter Radio initiative.



The Baxter Theatre launches Baxter Radio during lockdown

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

The Baxter has launched an innovative sustainability drive called 'Buy The Baxter a cup of coffee every month', which asks just R30 from 30,000 friends, theatre and arts lovers. It is a simple, affordable and hassle-free way to donate. The response so far has been heartwarming and encouraging. There are so many people who have beautiful and happy memories of the Baxter and that means so much to us. We would like to ask the public to contribute to our sustainability drive and encourage all their friends, family and contacts to do the same. Become a Baxter Coffee Angel and donate by clicking [here](https://t.co/OvqyOnEVMs).

“ Please support The Baxter's drive towards financial sustainability, by buying us a 'Cup of Coffee' for only R30 per month. Click here for details and to donate: <https://t.co/OvqyOnEVMs> [pic.twitter.com/K13CFp70Lp](https://t.co/K13CFp70Lp)— Baxter Theatre (@BaxterTheatre) [April 24, 2020](#) ”

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

The biggest challenges for the arts and artists is the complete loss of income, the cancellation of potential work planned over the next few months, the uncertainty and the duration of lockdown for the sector. In some countries, restrictions have been eased and in SA we have moved to Level 4 - public gathering spaces like theatres are not yet included in such eases. Many theatres abroad believe that it will only be possible from 2021. It looks like theatres will only be open again in about

October and that will come with a new set of restrictions, taking social distancing into account. That is a long time without income for artists, institutions and those who work in the industry. We will have to wait for direction from the government to see how to navigate the way forward, but what happens in the meantime?

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

The Baxter Theatre Centre forms part of the University of Cape Town (UCT) and when it comes to Covid-19, we are guided by its leadership and that of the government. UCT covers one-third of our operational budget, the rest we have to raise ourselves. Our salaries are therefore covered by the university. The Baxter team has continued to work remotely on various projects and we are in constant contact with each other, which is also a great way of staying in touch and checking in on everybody's well-being. Where necessary, we have provided data and administrative support to staff.

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

We are no different from any other business in that 'the show must go on'. We have been working from home and have conducted regular Zoom meetings to check in with each other and track progress on projects such as the Baxter Coffee Angels and Baxter Radio initiatives. Working in this way is not easy considering the nature of our business, as it involves several people and multiple skill-sets, but I am pleased to say that we have used the time most productively. Conducting meetings via Zoom may be an effective way to keep connected, but I have found that after too many of them, it becomes exhausting. I suppose it is part of the 'new normal' and probably a good indication of how things will have to be done in the future. Personally, I prefer human interaction and contact, it is far more meaningful.



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

I would say that it has made us all rethink the future and how we do things from now on, and that certainly applies to the arts. There can be no denying that it will somehow change much of what we have become used to and how we've taken so much for granted. Theatre is a lived experience, an exchange between artists and audience, thoughts and ideas, as it entertains and moves us from our comfort zones. It should not only show us that which is comfortable and familiar, but it should also profoundly affect us, challenge us, transport and transform us. I believe the arts will continue to be that conduit in the future and that it would be more vital. Theatre as an art form has evolved over many years and has been with us since the days of the Ancient Greeks and, I imagine, will be with us for a long time to come.

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

Yes, we have certainly seen new trends emerging. The biggest one being the rush to digital or livestreaming. However, I don't believe that as a medium, it can replace the essence of what theatre is or serves to be. Nothing can replace the live experience, being in the same space watching it live - that engagement or interaction between audiences and artists and even amongst audiences. Another trend is that creativity and 'thinking out of the box' is emerging - a sense of recalibration and rethinking of the arts. But, I believe that theatre will always be needed to entertain, educate, lift us and move us deeply as few other mediums can.

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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

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