

Q&A with new National Arts Festival CEO Monica Newton

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

19 Dec 2019

Earlier this month, it was announced that Monica Newton would be taking up the role of the new National Arts Festival CEO. We got in touch with her to chat about the evolution of the festival, future plans and how the arts can transform and uplift.

Newton was previously the head of the Gauteng department of sport, arts, culture and recreation and before that was deputy director-general: arts and culture promotion and development at the national department of arts and culture.

Prior to this, she was the CEO of the National Arts Council, a statutory body reporting to the department of arts and culture and established to support and develop the arts in South Africa.

Monica will move to Makhanda to take up this role and will start in January 2020, alongside new Artistic Director Rucera Seethal.



Monica Newton

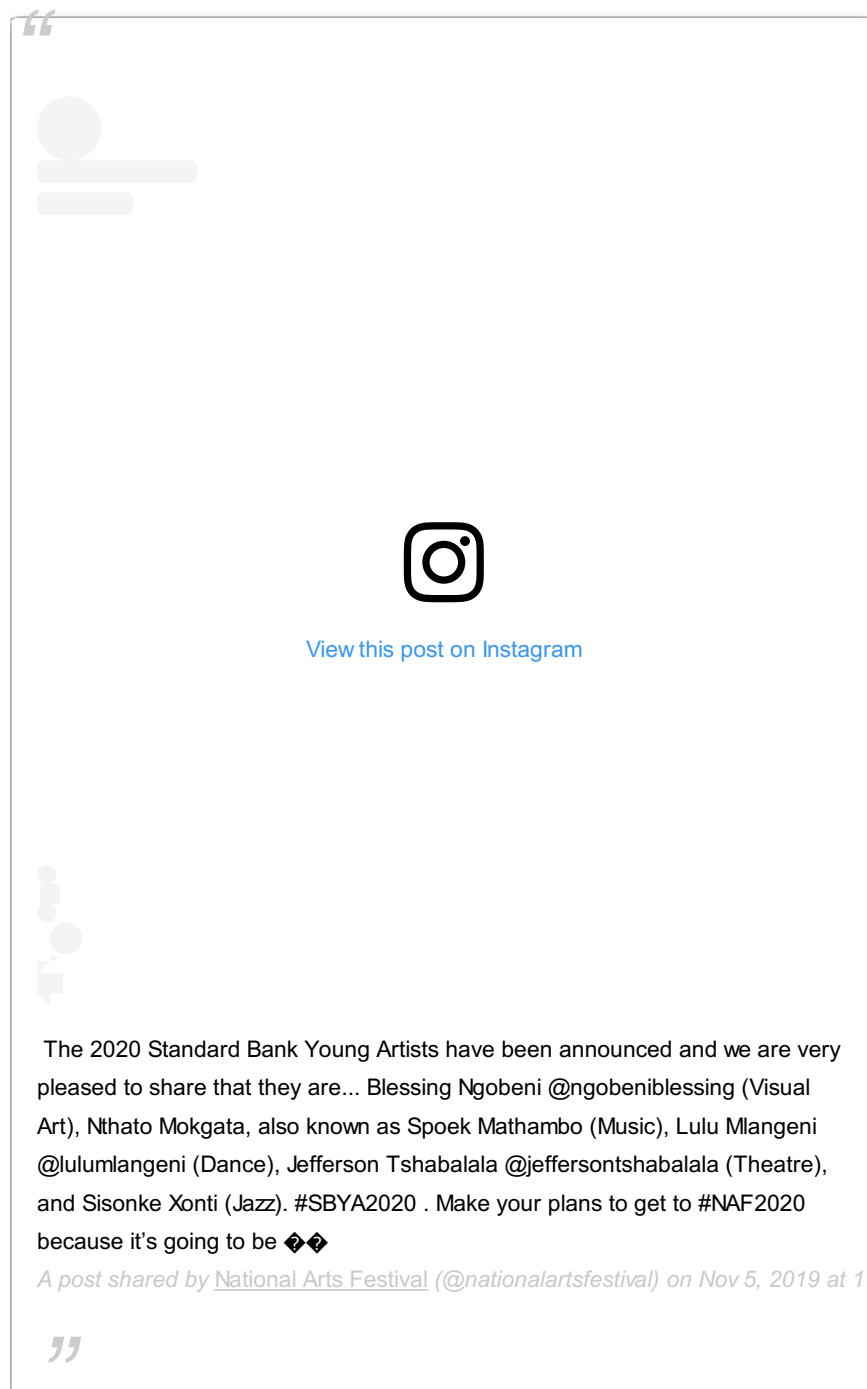
How do you see the National Arts Festival evolving and growing over the coming years?

The festival is as old as I am and has evolved with virtually every edition in response to changing art forms, changing audience interests and economic circumstances. The arts, and by their nature, festivals are continually adapting to reflect the hopes, dreams, past and current realities of their creators and I expect that will continue!

Festivals are an essential part of the “research and development” process of the sector, work is presented, tested, reformatted and reimagined continually so change is part of the DNA.

Artists and the development of the careers of artists are also an important part of the festival, so making sure that we continue to be accessible and a springboard to artistic growth and opportunity must be at the heart of what we do.

As the festival reaches out to new audiences, families, young people, older people – we will have to keep abreast of trends and audience patterns and adapt accordingly. Our focus has always been and will continue to be an amazing experience of all artistic genres that audiences will cherish and that will be on the top of every South African’s bucket list.



■ **Are you planning to make major changes in strategy when it comes to the festival?**

Any arts organisation in the current economic, social and cultural climate is asking whether it is still relevant, necessary and sustainable. We will be thinking about how to be as efficient with our resources as possible, while continuing to offer

the best of what South Africa and the world have to offer, and also expanding our audience base, reaching out with content and messaging that appeals to people locally and internationally who have never attended the festival.

■ ***In what new ways will the festival support the city of Makhanda?***

The festival's heart and soul is in Makhanda, so the festival will focus on making an economic, as well as social and cultural, contribution to the city with the aim of exceeding our current contribution of R94m per annum in direct economic impact!

The partnership between the Grahamstown Foundation and the National Arts Festival means that there are two other major festivals in the city annually; Scifest Africa and the SA Schools' Festival. In collaboration with the city, we aim to expand our core festival products and bring more people and events into the area.

The festival also owns a facility called the Power Station – which, as we develop it – we hope will become a significant part of the cultural and artistic life of the city. The Grahamstown Foundation has been working with the NAF on an incredible initiative to reimagine the 1820 Settlers Monument; expanding the story that the monument tells about the area and its history and making it a must-see tourist destination in the Eastern Cape. This will be a particular focus in 2020, which marks the bicentenary of the settlers' arrival in Makhanda.



Monica Newton named new National Arts Festival CEO

4 Dec 2019



■ ***What are some of the challenges of working on a festival on this scale?***

I hope to learn and overcome these as I go! The festival is a fundamental part of the arts ecosystem and everyone who works for the festival and the numerous sponsors who support it (such as the Eastern Cape Provincial Government and Standard Bank South Africa) are aware of the need for the festival to be excellent at every level, while also making the best and most efficient use of all the resources at our disposal.

The economic climate, and the extent to which people have the disposal income available to come to the festival is likely to be one of our biggest challenges in the next few years. Our response to this challenge will be to expand our donor and sponsor base to make sure that we can be as affordable as possible while still maintaining the quality and diversity of what we have to offer.

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Artists, are you working on your proposals for the 2020 National Arts Festival Fringe? Check out the link in the bio to access our user-friendly guides to help you weight up your options, work on a budget and complete the paperwork. Don't forget that if you at pay your registration fee before 31 December 2019, you'll get a 10% discount and free digital poster! . . 💎💎 You Should Be Dancing by Followspot Productions - credit Mark Wessels

A post shared by National Arts Festival (@nationalartsfestival) on Dec 7, 2019 at 12:21am PST

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📌 What excites you most about this new position?

Well, I am moving to Makhanda and back to my small town roots for a start! My commute to work is going to be much shorter, and believe it or not, there are at least three excellent coffee shops along the way to fuel my journey. It is an enormous privilege to be in a position to make a contribution to this institution in the arts sector that has launched careers and introduced audiences to profound and moving experiences, myself included.

The opportunity to be part of the National Arts Festival as it enters a new decade of opportunity will be a test of my current skills and will, I am sure, provide endless new learning experiences.

📌 What do you find most inspiring about the arts in South Africa?

I have always been in awe of the ability of the arts and artists, to create a shared experience for audiences, bringing us one step closer together and removing us from the everyday into a space where anything and everything is possible.



National Arts Festival appoints Rucera Seethal as its new artistic director

2 Oct 2019



📌 How do you hope the arts (in general) will positively contribute to South Africa and South Africans?

If we listen and observe carefully, the arts are the best indication of what is on the mind and in the hearts of our nation. The arts expose our weaknesses and celebrate our strengths; and if we take the time to really think about what we are being told we will be better for it!

The arts, and all related disciplines such as design, also play a really important role, mostly unseen, in the economy and everyday lives of South Africans. If we foreground this contribution and actively invest in its growth, we will reap significant benefits in key sectors such as tourism, manufacturing and telecommunications, not to mention creating opportunities for young people and women as creative entrepreneurs.

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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

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