

Dear Loeries, we had a fantastic time, but...

 By [Jarred Cinman](#)

14 Oct 2022

We had a fantastic Loeries this year - our best ever. I tell you that not because I want to brag but because I believe this gives me the opportunity to have my say without seeming like I have sour grapes. We have no complaints about our wins, we are really proud of them and we value what the Loeries stands for. So I hope you can take this from whence it comes: a desire to see the show get better and better.



Image supplied. Jarred Cinman, says he wants has a desire to see the show (Loeries) get better and better.

The new(ish) CEO of Loeries, Preetesh Sewraj had big shoes to fill. For 15 years before him, the inimitable Andrew Human took the show from a failing footnote in the ad industry to the dominant creative awards show on the continent. He delivered year after year, a show that ran like a well-oiled machine and consistently upped the status of the awards in the eyes of the industry and the world.

This is an unenviable job because if you want to attract criticism offer people the chance to win an award and then don't give them one. People get upset. They don't like losing and they like watching their competitors win even less. In addition, the Loeries is a costly endeavour and the effort to find sponsors and build a strong revenue stream to put on what is, at its core, a niche event for a fairly small industry, is enormous.

Add to this, Sewraj took on his role at almost the same moment the world was hit with a pandemic that made live events largely impossible. As a member of the Loeries Committee at the time I saw how he kept an optimistic outlook and rolled with the punches. In all my discussions with him since he has never wavered from the belief that the Loeries could survive, thrive and grow. It's impressive by any measure.

And so it may sound ungrateful or churlish to criticise this event at this juncture but if not now, when?

With the whole experience fresh in our minds and with those of us fortunate enough to have some trophies in hand, this is a good time to reflect before the dust settles and the preparation for next year begins afresh.

It's worth explaining that a lot of the decisions about the event are taken by a Board and Committee of volunteers from across the industry. The members of these bodies typically represent other organisations like the ACA or the IAB, and it is a very collaborative way of putting on an industry event.

The Creative Circle is a major stakeholder in deciding who the judging panels will be as well as keeping the categories up-to-date and relevant. I think Sewraj has also done a great job in keeping these participatory mechanisms active and engaged so that this event is not only owned by the industry but it is shaped by it. I was on the Committee myself for something like six years and it always felt like our views were heard.

Having said all of that, and being now an advertising civilian rather than a part of Loeries officialdom, I come to some of the problems I observed.

The venue, the host, the event

In a break from convention (ha ha) the Loeries took place this year at The Lookout at the Waterfront rather than a big convention hall as it has for most of its history.

Some of the events during creative week also happened in other interesting places like District Six with the after-party spilling into the streets of Cape Town City.

There is something to be said for breaking the formula and shaking things up but unfortunately, this decision made the event feel cheap. Sitting on plastic chairs in the gravel didn't feel good. The lack of reserved seats meant agencies were often scattered across the room. And the fact that for R2000 a seat not a single drink or a single morsel of food were included makes this all the more grating.

The MC for the evening was adequate, who motored through the endless lists of winners with appreciable aplomb but nothing else. This isn't on her, at all. Even Meryl Streep can't save a bad script (more on this later).

The production values for the event bordered on being amateurish. As Herman Manson wrote this week there was "little magic". But the more fundamental problem was the relentless monotony of the whole thing. Ready D fortunately has done this countless times and knew how to keep the music driving the show forward. But apart from that this show is, at its core, a long list being read out really slowly, interspersed with people walking a really long way in a narrow venue to collect a prize.

In this sense it is bedevilled by many of the same things as the Oscars or the Emmys but with a billion times less celebrity and glamour.

The content

All of those criticisms are really just preamble. The main problem with the Loeries event - and so it has been before but this felt worse than ever - is the utter absence of the work. The main, star of the show, the reason we are all here, the product of all the labour and effort that goes into this industry, is just not there on the night.

What do I mean by this? Well, I sat through over three hours of awards and I watched certain pieces - for example

something from the UAE that seemed to win the lion's share on the night - and I couldn't tell you what the piece is if my life depended on it. A short - we're talking 5-10 seconds - clip was shown over and over again, cut from the case film one imagines, but with no context or explanation. This was equally true for every other piece submitted.

The actual picture quality of that huge LED "wall" screen was nowhere near good enough to display the fine detailed content on show. Most of the text was illegible (including names of the team members on winning entries) and while this kind of display might be great for expos or video walls it is 100% the wrong choice for an industry where every pixel is scrutinised.

So why was the work not shown?

The Cannes Awards is a completely different experience to Loeries. After each of their five nightly shows, you leave inspired, amazed and, crucially, convinced that the work that won deserved the accolades. It is an uplifting and reaffirming experience.

The choice Loeries is making is quantity over quality. Inviting every silver award winner to come up on stage all the time that could be used to show the work is hoovered up. I understand why they do this - agencies that have travelled to Cape Town and put in all the effort want their moment in the sun.

So then why not split the difference? Show the gold winners in full and design a much faster and more efficient flow to have the silver winners collect trophies. If 30 golds are awarded all you need is a one-minute case film - exactly as Cannes requests when you enter - and you have a solution. It adds 30 minutes so find that time somewhere else - hand out silvers faster, ditch the weak live performance elements, and be more ruthless about speeches. This is not a hard problem to solve.

It is inexcusable to have the premier advertising awards show and not actually show a single piece of work meaningfully. Apart from anything else, it is incredibly boring and awful to sit in a makeshift structure listening to someone without any discernible personality read out the names of things you don't understand for countless hours. The fact that the most important awards of the night were handed out to a room that was 3/4 empty says about all you need to know about that.

The winning work

I'm going to make this point short because this is indeed a common complaint but, again, felt worse than ever this year. Why is the work winning at Loeries so different to the work that wins everywhere else? Why is there no apparent connection between the effectiveness of the work and the size of the prize?

I know we have Effies to measure effectiveness alone, but it is a delusional (and soon to be poor) ad person who thinks that creativity doesn't have to deliver intrinsically on business and brand performance. I'm not going to namecall but there is work that got awarded that I know for an absolute fact failed completely. And pieces that were marquee successes both in other creative awards and for the brands involved that scraped through with a craft certificate or nothing at all.

Don't take my word for it. Go and do the analysis and talk to the marketers whose money is so desperately needed to make this event a success and see what they think about this. It's a problem. And it needs to be addressed.

Let's talk about the Middle East

Listen, I was a part of the discussion and debate about why we should include Middle East in the Loeries. And thus I bear some responsibility for it. But I admit to the extent I supported this I was wrong. And so is and was everyone else who made this call.

We know that Dubai Lynx represents a threat of sorts to the Loeries and we know that all of Africa combined does not represent a super fast-growing revenue stream.

It's obvious why stretching just a little north, leveraging some of the Arab ties from North Africa, into wildly growing

economies like UAE and Saudi would make sense. It adds revenue, prestige, reach and grandeur and so it was worth a shot.

The problem is the Middle East doesn't take the Loeries seriously. Some agencies from the region enter, and the work (not that I have seen it) is of a high standard. Middle East work does well at other global shows, it's a region with excellent creative talent. And in the right forums and contexts African work should be and is judged against it.

But we have to take a moment of soul-searching here. Why must the Loeries - a South African event, an African event at a stretch, held in South Africa, judged largely by South Africans and owned and controlled by the South African ad industry bodies (ACA, Creative Circle, IAB SA etc) - seek to be the awards vehicle for the Middle East?

Is it to make the work better? Well, if so that would cast African work in very dim light. We are a country and continent with thousands of advertising and communications agencies, many of whom are highly awarded in global shows. We are more than the sufficient competition for each other.

Is it to make the show more diverse and interesting? We have barely scratched the surface of the talent, cultural richness and complexity of Africa. There is nothing the Middle East can teach us about diversity.

So, is it to make money? And if it is, is that really what should be motivating our main industry creative awards?

Yes, getting sponsorship is harder than ever and the South African economy and industry are not growing at the explosive levels of Dubai, and I admire the efforts Loeries have taken to keep entry costs fairly static.

But when the Loeries becomes a money-making endeavour first, regardless of how noble the motivation for the money is, its relevance is diminished.

No doubt the board representatives from the various industry bodies are behind this decision but each of them and the industry body CEOs and chairpersons need to, as I say, do some soul-searching. What comes directly after chasing a particular region for money is an effort to make it worth their while. And that can so easily taint the juries, the categories and all judgement calls, of which there are many, during such an event.

Apart from that nothing says anti-climax like handing out your biggest honours to people who aren't even there or have sent one lone recipient to trudge up on stage to no applause to haul their trophies back to countries where we are, if anything, a minor accolade on the trophy shelf.

I haven't spoken to a single person who thought this Loeries was great, or even good. I'm quite sure the Loeries organisation has had some positive feedback and for some of the really big winners - the Joe Public crew for example - maybe it was the night of their lives.

But turn a deaf ear to the rest of the deep, fundamental and damning criticism at your peril. Any potential sponsor who went to the show last week will be busily scratching zeroes off next year's cheque as we speak. And as a South African and African who actually did well and will benefit from this year's success I left feeling hollow and uninspired.

ABOUT JARRED CINMAN

As the Joint CEO of VMLY&R South Africa, Jarred leads both the Johannesburg and Cape Town offices. He oversees the inner workings of the agency, managing all departments from a business, HR and operational point of view. Jarred is also the executive in charge of HR and IT. Before VMLY&R was established in 2018, Jarred served as co-chief operating officer of Y&R Africa Group, overseeing operations at Y&R South Africa and NATIVE VML.

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