

Chapter 10

Depression: A Silent Killer of South African Artists

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ABSTRACT

Artists can safely be deemed to be caregivers who have held the hands of many during difficult times with their gifts. Though artists give so much of themselves, who takes care of them? Who brings them joy and hope? Artists are givers who keep pouring, but one cannot pour from an empty cup. Artists are prone to run dry due to societal responsibility and obligations, which compel them to fulfill a standard for the greater good. Due to their emptiness and a cup that has run dry, depression becomes inevitable. This chapter will explore the legacy and history of depression among South African artists and how the depression aftereffects have resulted in substance abuse, sexual recklessness, and suicide among artists. It will conclude by exploring how the sector has been shaken with recent suicide deaths and how the awareness of depression is slowly beginning conversations that aid healing.

INTRODUCTION

Artists have for decades been bestowed with the responsibility to be entertainers that bring joy and hope by society. Their gifts through song, poetry, dance, visual arts and acting have been healing remedies and escapes from trouble for decades. The chapter has made use of various online commentary through social media and digital newspapers to make its arguments and draw findings. And thus the chapter's literature review will entail social media posts and online literature. This chapter identifies the gap that exists in academic literature in South Africa, pertaining to

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the mental health of its artists. Thus it aims to bridge that gap by documenting its findings in this academic chapter. Due to the recent and frequent suicides in the sector, awareness of depression and mental health is gradually being realized, this chapter will detail these steps and make recommendations of how to effectively tackle the issues of mental health and how the various stakeholders and industry bodies can decisively deal with depression in the arts. The generic term ‘Arts’ in this chapter will be used for any form of art, ranging from visual art, music, acting/broadcasting, dancing and poetry.

BACKGROUND

Suicide in the South African arts sector was brought to light in 2018, after the deaths of two award winning artists succumbed to suicide. The first was, South African Television and Film Award (SAFTAS) winner, Shoki Makgapa in September 2018 and the second, multi award winner and song hit maker, Jabulani Tsambo, who was popularly known as ‘Hip Hop Pantsula’ (HHP) in October 2018. The deaths occurred a month apart, and a siren was suddenly raised when these two formidable artists took their own lives. Both were award winning artists, who seemingly were at peaks of their careers, HHP was known to be a song hit maker who pioneered for many South African Hip Hop artists. The South African ruling political party, the African National Congress (ANC) lauded him as being “a music icon who became a beacon of hope and inspired many artists, individuals in our country” (ANC, 2018). Though the ANC had highlighted the hope HHP brought, it revealed the irony of the situation. Though many were hopeful through his art, his gift and artistic offerings, he had no hope. This often is the irony that befall artists. Their role is to bring light, hope, joy and perspective- but they, themselves have none.

Though the awareness may have been brought to light regarding depression in the South African arts sector in 2018, one wonders how many artists have battled in silence prior to 2018’s awareness. Furthermore, one is further probed to wonder how many still are chained in depression and mental ill-health today. In 2009, actress and presenter, Bonnie Mbuli released her memoir titled, *Eye Bags and Dimples* in which she detailed her silent battle with depression that emanated from her childhood and began to consume her in her professional career. Though the book was warmly received, and many seemingly sympathized with her, depression remained an unspoken and unaddressed topic in the sector. Since 2018, artists such as comedian and actress, Tumi Morake and musician and radio extraordinaire, Unathi Nkayi have since detailed battles of mental health in their memoirs and have called for normalization of conversations around mental health and therapy. Former Miss South Africa, Shudufhadzo Musida during her reign created an initiative called

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