

Tsogo Sun Arts Academy stars to shine at final concert

The Tsogo Sun Arts Academy grand finale School Awards Showcase at Gold Reef City's Lyric Theatre on 26 November, which features the top young stars of the programme, is the pinnacle of the year's activities – giving the children the opportunity to show off their hard work of the year and be rewarded.

The Arts Academy programme is closing its third year with 480 children across 12 underprivileged schools – 40 in each school – in Diepsloot and Mayfair in Gauteng. "Every year the programme gets better and more is invested in these young lives, giving them new skills, a fresh perspective on life, and lifeskills in a range of different areas," says Vusi Dlamini, Group HR Director of Tsogo Sun.

In this past year the programme has introduced exciting new experiences into the youngsters' lives – they were taken to see War Horse and the Sound of Music, and the facilitators were taken to Cirque Eloize iD – which was particularly valuable for them as they all have dancing backgrounds.

The children were also given the opportunity to perform at the Tshwane Youth Festival, where they came second overall. As a first-time entrant, this was a remarkable achievement, but also exposed the children to new experiences that they would otherwise never have had, such as staying in a hotel, broadening their horizons and perspectives on the world around them.

The full-year Arts Academy curriculum is designed as an all-encompassing programme that uses the arts as the foundation for opportunities for growth and learning for the children in both primary and high schools. It covers the basics of drama, dance, vocal training and voice projection, as well as carefully structured lifeskills course that empower the youngsters to make sound choices throughout their lives.

The programme is steadily gaining momentum and credibility to the extent that the Tsogo Sun All Stars, the cream of the crop from the

12 schools who are given additional training in the performing arts, were this year invited to perform at corporate events such as conferences and the SA Business Women's Council, and have already received requests to perform in 2015.

Of great encouragement to Tsogo Sun too are the transformations in individual young lives that the programme achieves. Nkosikhona Ndebele, age 19, is a Grade 11 pupil at Diepsloot Number 3 High School who has excelled in the programme, winning last year's Naledi Star Award (Individual). "I used to be a bully at school; I would take other children's money and I hung out with the wrong crowd who influenced me to swear at teachers. But my attitude changed when Tsogo Sun came to our school. I met people who inspired me to become a better person, to become more respectful and more disciplined. I changed as a result of this programme; my school realised I had leadership skills and I was elected as the school's president in Grade 11. I also saw the importance of going to church. I won best solo dance last year using my karate skills and I am now able to dance for people and inspire them to do something amazing with their lives."

Margaret Makoka, Programme Coordinator with Minimax, the company commissioned to run the Tsogo Sun Arts Academy, says another positive spinoff of the programme is the increasing involvement and support by the parents of the Tsogo Sun Arts Academy children. "Initially our involvement with the parents was simply signing indemnity forms and communicating our activities with them, but they have been encouraged by the enthusiasm and commitment by their children to the programme and have started attending rehearsals and even offering to help in whatever way they can. On the strength of this, we are planning to include parents in the activities we have reserved for students in the past, such as sewing costumes, doing make up or helping out in other important ways. It makes a difference to the children when their parents are involved – and certainly is an encouragement to the parents to see how well their children are doing."

The Schools Awards Showcase follows two community concerts –

one in Mayfair and one in Diepsloot – where respected industry professionals adjudicated and the top performers were selected to go on to perform at the final concert at the Lyric Theatre. Awards are handed out for the following categories, the top high school, the top primary school, the best individual performers, the most enthusiastic educator the best performing facilitator, as well as academic achievement.

“This concert reflects the dreams and aspirations of the youngsters, often creating opportunities for the top performers to go on to make a career of the arts. It’s also about giving recognition to both the facilitators and educators who are a key part of the programme, for the expertise and effort they invest in the children,” says Shanda Paine, Tsogo Sun Group CSI Manager. “The Arts Academy is a perfect fit for Tsogo Sun which has a strong base in growing the arts in South Africa through its various theatres, but also because investment in people to enable them to progress in life is a strong part of our overall business strategy.”