

The following notice was circulated on the Rhodes University TopList on 14 September 2020:

Rhodes University Honorary Doctorate recipient and Arts & Culture advocate, Lynette Marais, dies from cancer

The Rhodes University community has learnt with great sadness about the passing of a passionate supporter of the growth of the South African arts sector, Lynette Marais, who Rhodes University bestowed with a Doctor of Laws (honoris causa) in 2009.

As Director of the Grahamstown National Arts Festival from 1989 to 2008, she built and developed the event into one of the largest festivals in the southern hemisphere. It brought established national and international arts practitioners to Makhanda. It has launched younger up-and-coming actors, playwrights, fine artists, musicians and singers on the road to fame.

During the twenty years that Marais presided over the event, it is reckoned that the Grahamstown Festival carried 9 057 productions and 32 275 performances; two-and-a-half million tickets sold (worth R54.3 million), and the overall contribution to Grahamstown's gross domestic product during these two decades was estimated at R688 million.

When Lynette Marais took over the directorship of the Festival in 1989, it was a challenging time of significant political transition in South Africa. She responded proactively and imaginatively. Her first step was to invite Barbara Masekela to speak at the 1990 Festival – a key figure who had long headed the African National Congress' arts and culture desk in exile. At that same Festival, three to four thousand complimentary tickets were distributed to local communities lacking the means to attend events.

Recognised as one of South Africa's most accomplished arts administrators, Marais was one of the key role-players in the National Arts and Culture Task Team which was set up to draft proposals for the White Paper on Arts and Culture. She has also generously offered advice to the KKNK Festival (Oudtshoorn) and to the Aardklop Festival (Potchefstroom). Over the years, Marais received several accolades for her uncompromising and committed service to the arts and cultural sector, including The President's Arts and Culture Trust Award for Arts Administrator of the Year (1998).

At her 2009 graduation address, she stated, "I am honoured to be conferred with a Doctorate by Rhodes University in recognition that the arts sector in which I worked has been vital to growing the economy of this city, and at the same time, growing the cultural fabric which has endowed South Africa with such a rich and diverse legacy."

She believed the arts "have a tremendous public value because apart from entertaining and stimulating audiences, the arts promote broad social and economic goals, which help to develop our societies".

According to Marais, the National Arts Festival was the first mainstream cultural group to back the cultural boycott in recognition of the imbalances in our society (in October, 1990).

Despite the numerous challenges she faced throughout her directorship, Marais firmly believed “the good times certainly outweighed the challenges. I have loved working with the artists of South Africa, many I knew when I came here and have got to know many more”.

To the 2009 graduating class, she said, “I have truly had an exciting and rewarding career and I now wish to congratulate all of you graduating here tonight – may your dreams and ideals for the future become a reality. You have one firm foot on the ladder, climb it slowly and steadily knowing that hard work and sound business principles will take you to the top.”

Rhodes University would like to offer heartfelt condolences to the Marais family and friends. For all the dedication Lynette Marais put in to make the Festival a success, we will be forever indebted.

ISSUED BY THE COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVANCEMENT DIVISION ON BEHALF OF RHODES UNIVERSITY