

## TALENT CONTESTED

An article appeared in the Arts/Cultural section of Mmegi in February 2004 with the heading 'BOTSWANA LOSING TALENT TO FOREIGN MARKETS. "Artists across the board are packing their bags for greener pastures elsewhere. The bulk of these artists are musicians who have been leaving the country in search of better opportunities in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America" the article said. Five years on the situation remains exactly the same.

Think of Shombi Ellis, the morning anchor of Gabz FM and Bad Boy Brandon on the afternoon drive show – both excellent radio disc jockeys, two of the best we have ever had, both fairly recently left our shores mostly because the money and opportunities here pale in comparison to what is offered elsewhere. But it's not just the impression that other markets are bigger that has resulted in a mass artistic exodus but also because young people in Botswana often cite a closed-door policy to creativity and new ideas (the key elements that artists thrive on) as the reason they move on.

In the newspaper article musician, Safie Sekgwa "lamented that in Botswana the music industry and market is a graveyard. He said that even though he is based in New York and is aware of the stiff competition there, which means that he may never make it and that being a hit there could be too much to hope for, he still feels a good two years in New York would be better than hitting his head against a brick wall here at home". He added "there is still resistance within the Botswana market where everything new that may not necessarily be new to the rest of the world is shunned and immediately dismissed".

We have hundreds of talented individuals in the country yet few ever appear on BTV. Kopano Allmon is one of the most talented performers I have ever worked with but her TV career was cut short due to creative differences, Shombi Ellis too. The list goes on and on. In my opinion there is not one programme on BTV that really captures the nation's attention – crazy isn't it? Lebogang Mothubudi is another case in point. An undoubtedly talented actor who has performed in the No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency for the prestigious BBC and also starred in South Africa's largest musical production, The Lion King, is now reduced to doing amateur dramatics at the Moth Hall. Why are these people not on our TV's? Instead we get singing competitions where the only criteria to appearing is you mustn't be able to sing.

So what's happening here? Are we shunning the truly talented and creative so that we can slump towards mediocrity? I guess that way no one shows anyone up. It's a well-known fact that mediocrity is easier to manage than excellence.

Is our narrow-minded view limited to those with artistic talent? I don't think so. A few months ago I interviewed a young, truly talented marketing guy who had been working for one of the UK's leading banks. With wealth of experience gained in central London and a natural propensity to think strategically (skills in short supply everywhere in the world), this high flyer was likely to be snapped up like the last Quality Street chocolate in the packet, surely? Afraid not. He stayed unemployed in Botswana for 6 months and in his own words "was forced to return to London". What's wrong when a London bank wants him but he isn't good enough for Gaborone? He is just one of many. You know them and I know them. People whom I think may be viewed as too smart, too cocky and worst sin of all, too young.

Those who have been expatriates in foreign lands come back here and are told that this is Botswana and that what they propose: new ways of doing business, technology solutions to efficiency problems and better ways of managing and rewarding staff, will not work here.

When I ask young Botswana why they feel the door is so often slammed shut, they blame ageism. The old guard is quicker, they say, to judge on how many years spent on earth over what they have achieved or potentially could achieve in the workplace. It's like no one wants to change or improve and that people who shine or are above the norm are eschewed.

Is it possible for a nation to have a love affair with mediocrity? Can a nation truly be ephebophobic (fear of youth), and afraid of exuberance and creativity?

Young people are a rich and vital resource that every country needs to harness and engage with, not a rising tide of pestilence that needs to be kept at bay, discouraged, discarded and squashed. Young people, talented and creative individuals - from footballers to internet millionaires, from website and game designers to record producers to singers and dancers, earn the United Kingdom for example millions of pounds and acres of credibility worldwide. Yet in Botswana it seems that they are never given the time of day and the barriers to success are so big that they get frustrated, disillusioned and leave.

I know the President is under a lot of pressure at the moment but I am hopeful that with his focus on the youth and his commitment to get them engaged things may change. This country will not fulfill its potential if the best of what we have is not used. And if you are reading Mr President a shake-up of BTV would go a long way in making sure our artists have a platform to perform as opposed to showcasing mediocre individuals, no doubt because they cost nothing. And for you leaders of corporate Botswana, PLEASE put some programmes in place where talent can be brought in regardless of whether there is a vacancy or not. Grab the talent and they will find a role for themselves and a purpose to realise. Ignore them and they are away to London, Paris, New York...anywhere mainstream instead of mediocreville.

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