

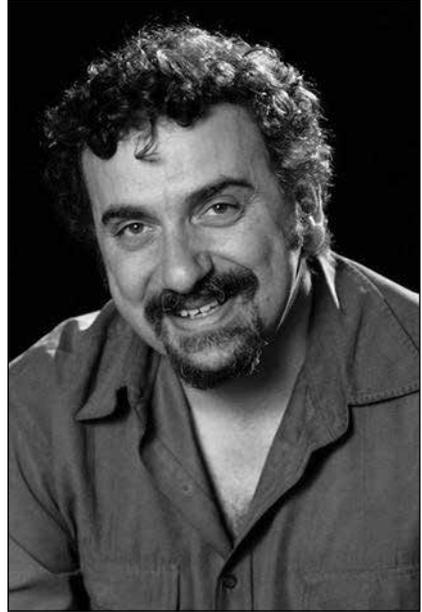
Themistocles “Themi” Venturas (1958–2017)

THEMISTOCLES “Themi” Venturas lost his battle with pancreatic cancer in September 2017. He died at Hospice surrounded by his family: wife Trish and sons Matthew (29) and his fiancée Beth, and Alexander (26) and his wife Megan.

First and foremost Themi was a family man – a doting husband and a proud and attentive father, he put his family first and arranged his work schedule around his family routine.

Themi Venturas (59) was an old-school theatrical all-rounder whose work ethic, broad range of skills and ability to multi-task would not have been out of place in his beloved Shakespeare’s time. His approach to theatre was much like the ring-master in an old travelling circus: he would be the one to personally help pitch the tent, stick up the posters, tame the lion, train the acrobats, hang the lights, placate the clown, make the popcorn, sell the tickets, ensure all the performers were in-costume and on-cue – and still be the one to walk into his spotlight in the sawdust ring with top hat, red tails, faux-moustache announcing in his distinctive voice, ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, Welcome...’

Themi had worked in the industry for 30 years in many capacities: as an award-winning director, writer, performer, musician, producer and theatre manager of multiple venues and theatre companies. He directed, and in many cases produced, more than 500 productions ranging from revues, musical theatre, comedy, Shakespeare, opera, new South African works, and ceremonies/corporate events. A visionary community leader, Themi has also been an active member and



initiator of many performing arts civic associations, networking groups and funding bodies.

Born in Mutare, Zimbabwe and sent to live in Port Elizabeth at the age of four, he loved theatre as a child – winning several beachfront talent contests and wrote his first play in Std 7/Grade 9.

His entire schooling was in Port Elizabeth – at St Patrick’s Marist Brothers College. As a national serviceman, while visiting his brother Nick at the University of Natal Durban, he found the drama department and met Professor Pieter Scholtz who convinced him to come to Durban to study. He studied drama at the University of Natal from 1981–1984 and received an honours degree *cum laude*.

As a student he began his enduring affinity with the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre, evidenced by his familiar face on many of the Jock Leyden

caricatures on the foyer wall. While at the University he started the EST Workshop group which gave classes to township youth. On graduation, he was offered a job as Head of Productions and Theatre Manager at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre and headed the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre Company.

It was during these years that he established himself as an inter-cultural performance specialist and earned the Zulu name of *Mahlek’Hlatini* (The Smiling Forest) as it was perceived that he smiled through his beard.

In 1993 Themí left the Playhouse and started Themí Venturas Productions: the only independent professional theatre company in Durban at the time. He directed and staged many local, national and international productions the most memorable of which was *Princess Magogo kaDinuZulu* the first ever Zulu opera which after several successful South African performances and tours went to the USA, the Netherlands and Norway. Also in his stable were many nostalgia tribute shows such as *Good Vibrations*, *Cantina Tequila* and *The Guitar that Rocked the World*.

In many ways Themí was the glue that bound the fragile Durban theatre community together – initiating projects, theatre venues, civic associations and festivals to put Durban on the map, to provide work for us all

and to give opportunities to emerging practitioners. His legacy is multi-fold, but possibly among the many things for which he will be remembered is encouraging new talent to pursue their dreams. He was a pioneer of working cross-culturally, and mentoring young performers, especially those who had been previously marginalised.

Some of his career milestones include the opening of the ICC, the Africa Peace Awards and the Durban Millennium celebrations. Themí initiated the Young Performers Project – now in its 16th year; he produced the Durban Tattoo and ran the Durban International Blues Festival every year. He was also president of the Alliance Française de Durban.

In May Themí found out that he was suffering from pancreatic cancer. He chose international experimental medication to curtail the illness. A fundraiser co-ordinated by his theatre friends, including John Vlismas, Aaron McIlroy and Jackie Cunniffe, was held appropriately at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre on Monday 26 June to raise funds to pay for this.

It is fitting that his final theatre performance was at the Elizabeth Sneddon Theatre watching young performers acting their hearts out in a masterfully directed and beautifully crafted production.

ILLA THOMPSON