

## **All Panellist Biographies** (in order of the programme)

### **Bernice Gordon**



#### **Biography:**

Bernice Gordon is a Dance Education specialist, subject advisor for the Western Cape Education Department. She is a curriculum innovator whose work bridges artistry, pedagogy, and policy. With a Master's degree in Dance, her research explored contemporary collaborations and gender practices in the Western Cape, contributing to inclusive arts discourse. Over two decades, she has led classroom teaching, teacher development, and curriculum design, including national and provincial assessments. As lead of the CAPS strengthening team, she is reimagining Dance Studies to reflect current educational and industry trends. Bernice advocates for diversity, presenting nationally on topics like differently abled bodies in dance. Her learner-centred, data-informed approach balances creativity with accountability. She supports educators with professional development and empowers learners to engage critically and resiliently with their artistry. Her work connects formal education with the evolving arts sector, preparing future practitioners and audiences to participate meaningfully in South Africa's creative landscape.

## Sifiso Kweyama



### Biography:

Sifiso Kweyama, born in UMkhomazi Kwa-Lembe Village, KwaZulu-Natal, is a leading South African choreographer and dance educator. He began his career at Phenduka Dance Theatre in 1989 and trained at Jazzart Dance Theatre under Alfred Hinkel. His work spans major companies and productions, including *The Rivonia Trial* and *The Suitcase*, and collaborations with institutions such as Tshwane University of Technology and Moving into Dance. Recognised as one of South Africa's top choreographers, he received the 2013 Choreographer of the Year Award for *Ngichaze*. Kweyama has lectured locally and internationally and performed for President Nelson Mandela and President Thabo Mbeki. His global engagements include festivals in Germany, Morocco, and Palestine. Currently, Sifiso is Head of Training at Jazzart. He also founded Yabantu Multipurpose and Performing Arts Theatre, empowering youth in his home village. His work is marked by innovation, humility, and a commitment to excellence in Dance Education and performance.

## Verushka Pather



### Biography

Verushka Pather is a distinguished Bharatanatyam dancer and founder of Khanya Designs, a fashion brand merging traditional Indian aesthetics with modern style. Trained under legendary gurus Padmabhushan VP Dhananjayan and Shanta Dhananjayan, she embodies their teachings in both her art and life. As Artistic Director of Natya Ananda, she is deeply committed to Bharatanatyam, using it to foster spiritual and cultural unity. Pather has performed globally, including prestigious festivals and venues across India, South Africa, Europe, and North America. She was the first South African to receive an ICCR fellowship and has danced for dignitaries such as Nelson Mandela and President Abdul Kalam. Her temple performances revive ancient traditions, and her productions like *Shakti* and *Poetry in Motion* celebrate divine narratives and classical collaboration. She also founded ZaRasa, a digital platform for artists. Her work bridges communities and honors the legacy of Indian indenture and shared histories in Africa.

## Otile Lebelo



### **Biography:**

Otile Lebelo is a performer and choreographer currently completing a BA Honours in Theatre and Dance at the University of Cape Town, specialising in choreography. His research explores how prior dance training affects the speed and accuracy of learning complex percussive rhythms—specifically the Bossa Nova—through an interdisciplinary lens combining embodiment, music, and movement analysis. Rooted in Contemporary and African Dance forms, his creative practice reflects a growing interest in the intersection of technology and performance. Lebelo investigates choreography as both a research tool and method, particularly in relation to rhythm, cognition, and embodied learning. His work is informed by a commitment to innovation and critical engagement, aiming to expand how dance is understood and taught. Through both academic inquiry and artistic exploration, he contributes to a dynamic and evolving conversation around dance, education, and performance in South Africa.

## **Allison Hendricks**



### **Biography:**

Allison Hendricks is a seasoned arts educator, choreographer, and arts administrator with over 34 years of experience in South Africa's performing arts and culture sector. A graduate of the University of Cape Town's School of Dance, she is the CEO and Artistic Director of Dance for All in Cape Town, where she leads artistic programming, youth development, and community engagement. Allison has served as Movement Director for Inspirations Youth and Dance Company, adjudicator for the South African International Ballet Competition, and project manager for Suidoosterfees. She is also the founder of Artists Extreme Pty Ltd and has taught dance within the Western Cape Education Department. Her achievements include international representation at cultural heritage seminars in China and panel participation in global cultural forums. With expertise in choreography, production management, and inclusive arts education, Allison continues to advocate for diversity, dignity, and transformation in the arts, both locally and internationally.

## Smeetha Maharaj

Photo

### Biography:

Smeetha Maharaj is a pioneering South African dance educator, performer, and choreographer, widely recognized as one of the first to teach Kathak in South Africa. Trained under Guru Nataraj Gopi Krishna in Mumbai, she founded the Nateshwar Dance Academy in 1980 and the Nateshwar Dance Company in 1998, with branches in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2025. Maharaj teaches Kathak, folk, and Bollywood dance, blending classical discipline with expressive freedom. Her classes, held weekly at Kendra Hall in Durban, attract diverse age groups and promote cultural connection. She has choreographed acclaimed productions such as *Chalo Cinema*, and *Ticket to Bollywood*, and works closely with the Indian High Commission to foster intercultural dialogue. A founding member of the South African Indian Dance Association (SAIDA), Maharaj has shaped the national dance landscape through education, performance, and mentorship. Her daughter continues her legacy, and her work remains central to preserving and evolving Indian dance traditions in South Africa.

## **Mbongeni N Mtshali**



### **Biography:**

Mbongeni N. Mtshali is a performance maker, scholar, artist and teacher. He completed his Ph.D in Performance Studies at Northwestern University on a Fulbright Scholarship, and is currently Director of the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town. Mbongeni's research explores black queer/femme performance in South Africa as well as Africa and its diaspora more broadly, with a focus on how black queer and/or femme subjects use performance tactically, to challenge nationally sanctioned repertoires of African respectability, cultural intelligibility and belonging. He has recently turned his attention to tracing queer genealogies of African decolonial world-making across the Caribbean, South Atlantic and Indian Ocean. Mbongeni has collaborated on creative projects with The Other Foundation, The Buffet Foundation, the Institute for Creative Arts, the Weaver Hughes Ensemble, the Block Museum, The Court Theatre, Victory Gardens Biograph Theatre, Hunan Opera House and the Artscape Theatre, among others. His recent professional recognitions include the Standard Bank Silver Ovation Award and the Fleur du Cap Theatre Award for notable achievements in directing and performance-making.

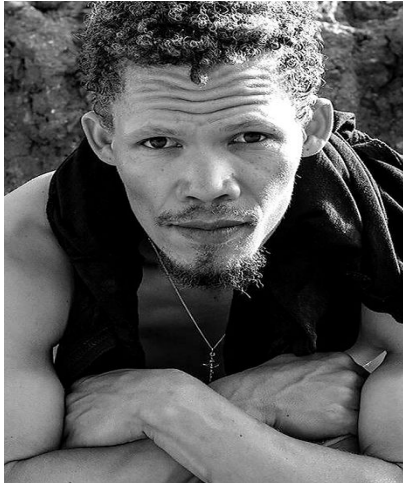
## Aphiwe Mpahleni



### Biography:

Aphiwe Beauty Mpahleni is a South African educator, curriculum writer, and dance/creative movement specialist with over a decade of experience in arts education. She serves as a curriculum writer for the Department of Basic Education and is an educator and leader at Zonnebloem Nest Senior School. Her work focuses on inclusive, transformative arts education, collaborating with institutions like UCT, STADIO, Jazzart, and Sibonelo Dance Project. Internationally, she has lectured at Chapman University in the U.S. Her research explores indigenous dance, curriculum reform, and inclusive pedagogies. Recognized as a Phenomenal Woman (HCI Foundation, 2022) and recipient of the Stella Clark Teacher Award (UCT, 2023), Aphiwe is committed to bridging cultural and language divides through the arts. Fluent in multiple languages, she brings innovation, passion, and cultural sensitivity to her work, shaping the future of creative movement education in South Africa and beyond.

## Byron Klaasen



### Biography:

Byron Klassen, founding member and Artistic Director of the Garage Dance Ensemble, is a dynamic force in South African dance. Born in O'okiep and raised in Cape Town, he began his journey through Dance Studies at school and training with Namjive and Dance For All. A pivotal experience in New York solidified his commitment to dance. Under mentors John Linden and Alfred Hinkel, Byron developed as a choreographer and teacher, impacting youth and professionals across the Western Cape and beyond. His works such as *I Don't, I Can't, I Won't*, *Elk Een*, and *Gat Innie Grond*, *Wond in My Siel* explore socio-political themes through movement. His site-specific productions and dance films have featured at major festivals and institutions. Byron's collaborations span leading South African and international artists. His recent work, *Wonde van die Siel*, confronts the crisis of missing children. In 2023, he received the ACT Impact Award, affirming his cultural and artistic leadership.

