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A Heads Up with Duncan Riley

With Covid-19 lockdowns worldwide and health authorities urging people to self-isolate and practice social distancing on a massive scale as part of an enormous effort to #FlattenTheCurve of this global pandemic ... we are reaching out to industry friends, colleagues, associates, partners, etc., and asking them to share their #StayAtHome and #QuarantineAndChill activities with us during this extraordinary time.

Duncan Riley heads up DWR Distribution, a dynamic and successful distributor of major entertainment brands - including Robe - in South Africa.

Normally in Spring and Summer, the HQ in Johannesburg would have been a hive of activity, and with corporate events, awards shows, television productions and year-end functions, the DWR team would have been supporting the country's rental market and theatres with equipment, technical assistance and promoting clients by sharing numerous photos and write-ups of their shows.

This is also usually a time when SA would host visits from international guests - like Robe's Josef Valchar and Harry von don Stemmen - for a roadshow or a product launch. DWR invests considerable time and resources in training, so the workshops are always popular. In addition to the roadshows and product launches, the company is involved in all aspects of the production and entertainment technology industry.

Robe: Where are you right now?

Duncan: We are back at work in Johannesburg, following the safety guidelines with a temperature check in the morning and constant sanitising.

It has been very sad to lose many of our staff members, and the remaining team are working on reduced salaries while pushing really hard to keep the company going and to keep both ourselves and the industry motivated.

Robe: How are things emerging from the lockdown in your region / country?

Duncan: On 21st September, our country moved to Level One. The eased restrictions allow up to 500 people for outdoor gatherings, a maximum of 250 people for indoor gatherings, while the existing restrictions on sporting events remain in place.

Robe: How did you spend your time during lockdown?

Duncan: Initially, I thought we'd be in lockdown for three weeks. At that time, I spent a great deal of time on the phone, catching up with clients.

On a personal level, running helps me to stay more focussed and has been a way to release some of the pressure.

We decided to stand behind #FeedourCrew, a charity fundraiser to assist industry freelancers, who have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. As an industry, we have had very little support from the government.

I was inspired by the UK's #LightItRed and Germany's #NightofLife. As a result, our industry pulled together and created #LightSAred, which gained huge support and traction throughout the country, so much so that we were able to secure a seat around the table and start conversations with government.

DWR also supported the #Flightcasemovement and pushed flightcases to our government offices in Pretoria to plead for assistance.

On 30th September, we lit our office to support the global campaign #Wemakeevents.

Robe: What are your biggest concerns / considerations as lockdowns ease worldwide?

Duncan: I feel that we cannot be locked up forever!

It has always been my opinion that those who are more vulnerable, older or sickly, should be careful and take special care of themselves. As a community, we should support people in that position, by allowing them to work from home or assisting them as we can.

For the rest of us, we cannot possibly hide away from society forever. It is not good for our mental and emotional state of mind, especially when considering children and young people. People need people.

Robe: Do you have any thoughts / predictions about how and when live events and the industry will re-start?

Duncan: I would love to say open events right now - we are so desperate as an industry. We keep hearing 2021, but the sooner the better.

Robe: Going forward, how do you think live events and the entertainment technology industry will change in a post-Covid 19 world before there is a vaccine widely available?

Duncan: The live events industry has always catered for events with safety protocols in place and following strict procedures.

We are an accountable industry.

Ideas could see events running paperless, temperatures being taken at the entrances of shows, sanitising, wearing masks and encouraging people to drink responsibly to enable them to think clearly and adhere to social distancing.

We could promote outdoor events or shows held in massive venues. In South Africa, the malls are currently busy, and flights are full. People are living. As the world, we need to be permitted to work again and bring joy to people with the entertainment we bring. It's our mandate.

Robe: How sustainable do you think these changes will be?

Duncan: It should not be difficult to adhere to.

Robe: Has anyone / anything particularly inspired you since this crisis started?

Duncan: A number of people have inspired me!

It's funny how it's always the same people who want to get involved and make a difference. Someone who has worked tirelessly is Sharif Baker, Chairperson of the Technical Production Services (TPSA) and spokesperson for #LightSAred. And then to an unsung hero, Mike Lord for the SA Events Council, who has been behind the scenes presenting government with proposals to safely bring back events.

Robe: Own question / answer / message of solidarity or something you'd like to say?

Duncan: We realize that it's impossible to expect everyone to stand together and in agreement at all times. But we do have a common goal, namely, to prove to government that we have always adhered

to strict safety protocols and that the world deserves to be united by theatre and the arts!

