



CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

18th Drama for life Conference and Festival: Footsteps on Fire: Reclaiming the Legacy of 1976 to Now

Conference & Festival | 22–23 September 2026
Drama For Life - University of the Witwatersrand

Over the past decade, the global landscape has appeared to fracture under the weight of unevenly realised democratic promises, intensifying socio-economic disparities, and escalating structural violence. All the while, contemporary social movements remain deeply shaped by unresolved, visceral historical formations.

The South African trajectory, marked by monumental systemic friction and profound constitutional shifts, stands as both a specific historical archive and a powerful analytic lens through which to examine global struggles for dignity, equality, and social justice.

The year 2026 marks an extraordinary and urgent historical convergence within this landscape:

- **70 years** since the 1956 Women's March against systemic pass laws.
- **50 years** since the 1976 Soweto Uprising, where youth put their bodies on the line against colonial education.
- **30 years** of South Africa's Constitutional Democracy.



In this third decade of South Africa's democracy, the 18th Drama for Life Conference and Festival emerge precisely at the intersection of these milestones. This convening is **explicitly not a nostalgic commemoration** or a passive heritage event. Rather, it is a forward-looking democratic, academic, and artistic reckoning with our contemporary condition.

We invoke the metaphor of **"footsteps"** to interrogate both our inheritance and our future-making: *Whose footprints do we walk in? What tracks have been systematically erased? And how do we step into the fire of our current moment to blaze radical new paths?*

We are currently witnessing deep democratic disillusionment, staggering youth unemployment, rampant gendered and racialized violence, environmental degradation, and shifting landscapes of digital surveillance. In response to these unfolding crises, this conference and festival asks one central question:

"How do we inherit, perform, and live out our history, and how do we want to perform it forward?"

In this iteration of the Drama for Life convening, we position performance not as passive spectacle or mere entertainment, but as **Method, Inquiry, Archive, Embodied Knowledge, Democratic Practice, and Social Intervention**. We assert that theatre and performance constitute a form of living protest and civic dialogue. Here, the body is understood as a site of critical, decolonial knowledge of production capable of holding grief, resistance, healing, and freedom in equal, restorative measure.

We invite contributions that are theoretically rigorous, artistically compelling, and politically attentive to marginalized, youth, and Global South lived realities, while remaining cautious of analytical overreach.

Themes



1. Youth Agency and Intergenerational Dialogue

We invite approaches that explore: In what ways do contemporary youth realities and digital movements relate to, diverge from, or honor the legacy of 1976? We seek to engage critically with the friction of youth unemployment and exclusion. Can an arts-based intergenerational dialogue illuminate new strategies for community resilience, or does it risk overgeneralization by detaching from the immediate crises facing today's youth?

2. Democratic Participation and Constitutional Praxis

Here, we invite contributions that consider how performance can audit and enact the promises of freedom, non-racialism, and non-sexism. This strand explores how mechanisms of state-sanctioned exclusion can be challenged using applied arts. How can theatre revitalize citizen engagement, give tactile form to constitutional rights, and offer community-driven interventions against democratic disillusionment?

We particularly welcome contributions that engage constitutional literacy as a lived, embodied, and participatory practice. Thirty years into South Africa's constitutional democracy, we ask: How do communities understand, claim, perform, and defend constitutional rights in everyday life? What role can theatre, performance, arts education, and cultural activism play in translating constitutional values into accessible public knowledge? We encourage submissions that explore creative methodologies for developing constitutional awareness, fostering civic agency, strengthening democratic participation, and cultivating cultures of accountability, dignity, equality, and social justice

3. Artistic Expression as Resistance and Healing

We invite explorations that trace the dual capacity of the arts to disrupt oppressive systems and hold collective trauma. This theme focuses on applied drama, arts



therapies, and grassroots performance practices that respond directly to gendered, racialized, and tribalized violence. How do we approach grief not as a dominating narrative of despair, but as an essential site of ritual, collective witnessing, and systemic repair?

4. Memory, Identity, and Access

This strand invites contributions that critically interrogate the archive. Who has the right to represent history, and how do we democratize access to the arts for marginalized demographics? We encourage submissions that map the cartographies of structural barriers to cultural participation, exploring how memory is embodied, historicized, or reclaimed across diverse spatial and regional contexts.

5. Alternative Futures and Radical Imagination: From Analog to Algorithm

We invite contributions that map the emerging frontiers, alternative technological imaginaries, and possible futures of social justice arts. This includes analysing the transition from historical analogy protest to contemporary digital activism, algorithmic governance, and surveillance. How do artists and activists deploy speculative performance and the radical imagination to subvert evolving structures of power and confront the global ecological crisis?

Submission Categories

- **Individual Papers:** Please send us a 300-word abstract, along with your name, email, and institution of affiliation. Academic presentations are allocated 30 minutes, followed by 15 minutes of discussion.
- **Panels / Roundtables:** Organized sessions of not more than 4 related papers, or interactive discussions with 4 to 6 participants. The proposal must include a 300-word summary of the session's overarching framework,



along with individual participant information and paper abstracts where applicable.

- **Performance Works:** Studio-scale or site-responsive theatre, movement, dance, spoken word, or performance art (maximum 45 minutes). Submissions must include a 300-word conceptual description and a preliminary technical rider detailing spatial and audio-visual requirements.
- **Workshops & Other Sessions:** Interactive, experiential, or pedagogical skills-sharing sessions (90 minutes) rooted in applied drama, arts therapies, or activism. Please provide a detailed description of the facilitation methodology and target audience.

Submission Guidelines

- All proposals must align with the conference themes, sub-themes, and Drama for Life's applied arts and social justice mandate.
- Participants requiring international visas should submit their proposals early to facilitate the timely issuance of institutional acceptance letters.
- Performance proposals are reminded that as a community-facing, civic-minded festival, technically minimal and highly adaptable works are heavily prioritized.

Key Dates and Contact Details

- **Submission Deadline:** 21 July 2026 • **Response on Acceptance:** By August 2026 • **Conference & Festival Dates:** 22–23 September 2026
- **Venue:** University of the Witwatersrand, Braamfontein Campus, Johannesburg, South Africa
- **Registration:** Registration and attendance details will be made available via our official submission portal.
- **Submission Link:** <https://forms.gle/uMuMsyGvh1HBeaP69>



- **Email Address for Queries:** DFL.Conference@wits.ac.za

We are deeply excited and look forward to your critical, creative, and courageous participation!