

# The Business Life/Arts & Entertainment



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## Music without any visual distractions

Musician Ster Paschke, who has been blind since birth, is performing her Concerts In The Dark this month and next, writes Penny Haw

**I**F YOU'VE ever sat still on a pitch-black night in the middle of nowhere with nature as your only companion, you'll know how amplified the sounds, smells and textures around you become. The musty scent of the earth saturates every breath you take. The rock you're sitting on, initially merely cold and hard, reveals itself as also dimpled, scarred and mossy. And the rustling of leaves and whooshing of wind are no longer indistinguishable instruments in a large symphony orchestra; they're featured soloists with individual stories to tell and a variety of emotions to suggest.

And, if you sit long enough, unafraid of the dark, you'll discover a whole new world; a place that is inaccessible when light, sight and spectacle lead your senses.

It is this world Ster Paschke, who was raised in SA, wants audiences to experience during her Concerts In The Dark. The pianist, accordionist and composer's music is not only performed in the dark, it is also composed and practised in darkness. She has been blind since birth.

"The world in which the music I play is created in what you, as a sighted person, perceive as 'darkness'. So I thought it would be interesting to let the audience experience it as I do," she says of Concerts In The Dark, 10% of the profits of which go to Operation Smile SA, an organisation that provides free reconstructive surgery to children with facial deformities. Having been born with a cleft palate and lip, the musician relates to the initiative and fully understands the enormous value of these operations.

"The concept for the concert is very simple; we switch off all the lights in the auditorium for the performance. Why not? I don't need them," she chuckles. "But seriously, the idea is to encourage the audience to see only the music and, hopefully, to experience it at a deeper level than they would when confronted by the normal visual distractions."

Paschke, whose performance name is usually just Ster, hopes to give people the opportunity to experience what happens when sound "comes and lives in their world" as it does in hers.

"Some sounds are melancholic and distant, others ferocious and immediate. Sounds can make you melt and



**PROACTIVE:** Ster Paschke is not the kind of musician who waits for things to happen.  
 Picture: TREVOR SAMSON

freeze, tremble and prance simultaneously. Sometimes they clamber and swarm over each other just like the cacophony of conversations in a crowded restaurant. Then they expand and stretch and grow apart, and start bouncing like voices in an empty building.

"Sounds can creep up on you and cocoon you in cotton wool. Other times they drill through your buzzing thoughts and startle you out of them. Or they drug and envelop you like a room full of incense and candles; so beautiful they could make you mad. Sounds have so many places for pictures that you can rumple and shake around to your heart's desire. They allow you to smell, touch or taste absolutely anything you want. And that's what I'd like my audiences to experience."

While she's earnest about enhancing the audience's enjoyment of her vibrant combinations of classic, jazz and world music (all of it in her head sans sheet music), she is cautious about prescribing how people might interpret her work.

"I seldom talk about what my music may or may not be trying to say. I want people to decide for themselves whether compositions are light, dark or somewhere between. Music is all about personal interpretation and what you see in my work is between you and the music. I simply hope that what you see is clearer and more meaningful in the dark."

**Some sounds are melancholic and distant. Sounds can make you melt and freeze, tremble and prance simultaneously**

Paschke first dreamt of becoming a musician at the age of about three. After tinkering about on an electronic Yamaha keyboard for a while, she was delighted when her mother bought a piano. "Music has always played a big role in my life. It's always been there. And, when I began playing the piano, my family hoped it would stop my incessant chatting. It didn't. I could do both very happily!"

Despite her early tinkering, she began formal lessons only when she was 13, which, she says, was "quite old to start". It didn't impede her progress because she's not someone who is easily held back from ambition; a lesson, she says, she learnt from her family.

Her parents fought long and hard to have her accepted at a mainstream school. After seven unhappy years at a school for the visually impaired in Worcester, in the Cape winelands, she was finally enrolled at Bloemhof Girls High in Stellenbosch, where her family lived at the time.

In hindsight, she's philosophical about the experience: "I accept that schools for the blind are ideal for many. They provide security for those who want it. But my parents brought me up to believe I could achieve whatever I set my mind on. They taught me to ask questions of others and to challenge myself. I wanted to do that in the environment inhabited by my family."

She went on to become the first blind person in the Western

Cape to matriculate with a mainstream education and followed school with a degree in Bmus Performance (piano and organ, cum laude) from the University of Stellenbosch.

Although she has taught piano, guitar, recorder and keyboard, these days she devotes most of her time to composing music and performing. When she's not in Cape Town, she lives in Berlin, where she thrives in a "culturally rich and creative environment", performs regularly and collaborates with other artists whenever possible.

Some of the numbers performed in Concerts In The Dark are, in fact, the result of a recent collaboration with her brother-in-law, Dutch singer, songwriter and poet Stef Bos. These compositions are linked with a soundtrack of poetry written and read by Bos.

"I was visiting my sister (painter Varenka Paschke, who is married to Bos) in the Netherlands and one day, while I was playing the piano in his studio, Stef came in and began reading some of his poetry with the music. It really worked well so we agreed to collaborate."

Officially named Sigrun Paschke — Ster is a long-time family nickname — she released her first CD, In Die Donker, at the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival earlier this year. The CD, which she says is best listened to "in the dark under a snugly blanket while sipping on a glass of excellent wine and devouring a slab of gourmet chocolate", is available via her website and at her concerts.

"I'm not the kind of musician who waits around for things to happen. I believe you have to be proactive as a performer. I'm always on the lookout for new events, collaborations and venues. It's the only way to make a living in this business. I love to perform. I get such great energy from it and that motivates me to keep looking for new opportunities to perform."

Ster will perform Concerts In The Dark at the SABC Studios in Cape Town on December 10 and 11 before taking the show to George on January 6.

She is looking for opportunities to perform in Gauteng too, before taking the show to Holland for the first time, in April next year.



**CINEMA WOW:** The Dahlings, from left, Elizma Badenhorst, Nacia Kruger and Nadia Beukes, go retro with an impish wink.

## The Dahlings' revue makes nostalgia hip

CHRISTINA KENNEDY

**T**HREE swinging chicks, a parade of vintage tunes and a montage of classic cinema moments — and no desire whatsoever to change the world. That's the winning recipe behind the cabaret revue, Cinema Wow, which goes retro with an impish wink.

The trio is The Dahlings, made up of Elizma Badenhorst, Nadia Beukes and Nacia Kruger. And what sweethearts they are: pretty as a picture, dressed to the nines and giving a snazzy, jazzy treatment to songbook standards and contemporary hits in the close harmony style of the Andrews Sisters.

Their star has been on the rise over the past couple of years, and now this polished act can be seen until Sunday at the intimate Space.com venue at the Joburg Theatre complex.

From the moment they mince on stage, clad in chic 1940s wartime-styled factory worker garb, complete with red lipstick, hair nets and "we can do it" chutzpah, you suspect you're in for a show that's bracingly different. Even though the revue is dotted with amusing allusions to the Good Housekeeping female stereotypes of yore, the performers are not seeking to make any profound antipatriarchy statement. This is, they insist, simply a slice of entertainment "about nothing and everything"; a fruit salad of juicy and sweet musical treats.

After all, surely not all artistic endeavours have to "matter". And even if entertainers do want to change

the world, there's nothing wrong with going about it in a nuanced way — like by putting goofy grins on people's faces and making them pack up their troubles for an hour or so.

This is certainly what The Dahlings accomplish. Their show is unashamedly frivolous yet classy fare with jaunty and wistful tunes, light-hearted asides, and the primary-colour jamboree of their many costumes contrasting with the backdrop of black-and-white movie clips from Singin' in the Rain, Casablanca and others.

Like glamorous Hollywood screen sirens, these singin', dancin' dames work their magic with favourites such Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree, A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square, In the Mood, Night and Day, As Time Goes By and Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy. But they also slap an old-school coat of paint on more modern songs such as Lemon Tree, Crazy in Love and Like a Virgin.

Not all the arrangements fit snugly with the apple-pie harmonies: it's almost a sacrilege to sing Kate Bush's Wuthering Heights, backed by footage of Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon, without conveying any of the unhinged tumult and passion of the work. And, admittedly, it's not easy to sustain audience interest for 70 minutes without a concrete theme. But what The Dahlings get right in Cinema Wow is to make nostalgia hip. Co-creators Jaco van Rensburg and Timothy le Roux are seasoned performers and choreographers who bring a professional ethic to this slick production.

## Even respectable TV can't escape targeting by the web's rude horrors

AT A recent dinner when one must, certainly in Joburg, go around the table and have everyone confess what they do, one young woman said she was "a freelance blogger". Actually, she didn't so much say it as declare it, with a certain smug triumph, as if it were a real job. Seldom have I heard being "self-unemployed" so well spun.



**KATY CHANCE**  
 Chance Comments

"Wow!" replied some. "That's just ... what? ... so, like ... wow..."

Essentially it means she has a job of no fixed abode; neither she nor her work has a domicilium citandi et excutandi. Her oeuvres are of the ether.

If I were a mean person I would say she freelances because she can't get onto a permanent payroll and she blogs

because so-called traditional media (or as those of us working in traditional media call it, "media") won't pay her to put her words on a page or in somebody's mouth.

As I have said before, nobody has ever published a critically acclaimed and best-selling book

**We had French airline pilots (of a now defunct airline, quelle surprise) giving a literal meaning to the term cockpit**

in the desperate hope it be picked up as a blog, but many well-written blogs have been picked up by the print world — and the writer is always shocked and delighted by this "upturn" in their lot. Long may that hierarchy obtain — and I believe it does obtain, in all media, not just the written form. I believe this because of a programme I

felt obliged to view recently: Rude Tube (SonyMax).

The show is one of the most distasteful I have ever watched, and I have watched both Cheaters and Touched by an Angel. You have been warned, but I warn you again now: reading what follows is nowhere near as bad as having to write it. And don't even think about tuning in.

Rude Tube is a compilation, a weekly top 10, of the most "funny, weird and notorious internet videos of all time". According to the voiceover, watching every video currently posted on YouTube would take 500 years to get through. That, you may think, was the scariest part, but read on....

One episode started with a woman making rude noises but not from the orifice they usually come from (in denim, which is actually pretty impressive). We had a cute toddler captured eating his own excrement by a proud father. We had a moron hitting golf balls at full whack into his friend standing just 2m away (and yet no video of him doing the same to someone he doesn't consider a friend). We had guys paying a man to drink a product to make him projectile vomit — then offering him \$1 000 to lick it up. And he did.

We had French airline pilots (of a now defunct airline, quelle surprise) giving a literal meaning to the term cockpit. We had a parrot who told

visitors to "F\*\*k off" before demanding a biscuit. We had a pair of dogs copulating apart from the one on top (at the back?) who was also vomiting. And the most profoundly disturbing video, I kid you not, of a dog masturbating.

But I'm sure you too have seen the paradox here: internet videos on a TV programme. Why? Because it's a step up. Because TV is a tested and proven medium of long standing which comes to you, rather than you having to go to the monumental effort of going online to see such prurient rubbish. It's a respected medium — despite the likes of Rude Tube finding a spot in its line-up. But wait, there's more.

The final video, the number one spot, was the worst of all. Not because it was disgusting, but because it perfectly exposed the confusion that surrounds what content suits what medium. It was video footage of Tom Mabe, a comedian-cum-phone prankster in the US. He just loves telemarketers ringing him in the evening so he can turn the tables on the caller and record it. So we had a screen of text, the transcript of the call — which we could hear — on a TV programme about internet videos. Call me psychic, but I think there may be a better "traditional" medium for a phone prankster. One that has audio as its main delivery medium. Surely there must be

something like that ... isn't there? One that's been doing phone pranks for years? Ooh, I know! Rudio!

The show's final voiceover comment was said, I felt, just a tad wearily; a little embarrassed even. "Ten hours of videos go up on YouTube every minute," he said. "Aren't you glad we went to the effort of going through them for you?" Even he didn't sound convinced. He sounded despondent with his career choice, as if he knew something better lay in his future. He was destined for greater things. I agree and think with just a little application and only slightly less aptitude, he could become a freelance blogger.  
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