

The inclusive, unstoppable power of SheSays

 By Leigh Andrews

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SheSays is all about having each other's backs and listening to each other. Here's how the local Cape Town chapter is set to snowball its efforts.



From left to right: Anelde Greeff, Marina Tokar and Johannie van As at the first SheSays Cape Town event

SheSays is a global network for creative women, but they're quick to explain that this is not a bra-burning set-up. Rather, think of it as having wine with your favourite 100 work wives, as their free sessions offer the chance to talk about the things that bug us and find practical hacks to fix them.

And in their latest monthly newsletters, the founders of the Cape Town chapter of SheSays mentioned lots to excite their fans.

So while they've only hosted one event themselves so far, with the second event taking place this week, SheSays is by no means a fledgling foundation, as the global edition is celebrating a decade of disruptive dialogue aimed and pushing the fast-forward button on turning attendees into game-changers.



Largest creative network for women, SheSays, launches in Cape Town

6 Apr 2018



That's my type of collective! I caught up with the founders of the Cape Town chapter – Anelde Greeff, Marina Tokar and Johannie van As – to find out more about their mission and why they ask and listen, whenever and wherever they have the opportunity...

■ ***Explain the essence of the global SheSays movement, which has been running for a decade.***

Greeff: SheSays is the world's largest creative network for women. A network that is focused on the engagement, education and advancement of women creatives. It has a presence in over 42 cities around the world and is run by a volunteer network of women.

SheSays provides women in creative industries with the thought leadership and connections to fast-track their careers. It runs on three principles:

1. Firstly, it's for the people and by the people: members shape their own event formats and themes.
2. Secondly, autonomy. Founders don't dictate how chapters operate. We can totally do our own thing here in Cape Town.
3. Lastly, it's about doing: Encouraging conversations that will lead to actions. But that's the official stuff.

At its heart, SheSays is about women having each others' backs.

■ ***Fantastic. You recently launched the CT chapter. Talk us through how that came about, and why it's so important to empower SA female creatives in the current business and social context?***

Tokar: For several years, I was living between Cape Town and New York City (NYC). In NYC, there is palatable energy around female empowerment – you really feel the winds of change coming to industries like advertising, with the rise of organisations and movements centred around changing the status quo.

That status quo, according to the 3% Conference, is that 89% of creative directors are men, in an industry which starts out 50/50 in lower ranks – so women just don't make it to the top.



A scene from the first SheSays Cape Town event.

When I finally made the move to Cape Town, I was surprised to see a dearth of energy in this space. There were hardly any professional organisations or meet-ups in the communications field at all, let alone ones with a female-focus.

“ Yet when I spoke to locals, it sounded like this was something sorely needed – many described advertising as being a “boy's club” in the upper ranks; few could name more than a handful of female creative directors, let alone a black one; everyone – male and female alike – agreed the time had come for change. ”

This gave me the idea to start a chapter of SheSays here in the Mother City. I reached out to the founder, Alessandra Lariu, to see what I could do, and she connected me with Johannie van As, who had been exposed to SheSays in the UK and had a similar idea a while back.

She then recruited her friend Anelde to join us, and from there the three of us were unstoppable in our mission to bring SheSays to Africa, with the launch of the Cape Town chapter.

■ **And it looks like you gave just what we needed. What's the response been like so far from attendees?**

Van As: From the moment we popped up on Facebook and started talking to potential speakers, the reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. If we had 50 people show up to our first event, it would've been somewhat embarrassing but passable for a first attempt.

Instead, tickets sold out and almost 300 women showed up at the Red & Yellow Creative School of Business, to hear the likes of Nikki Cockroft, Paige Nick and Ingrid Jones speak on the subject of future-proofing your career.



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The next day, we were inundated with emails of people wanting to get involved as volunteers or offering their services. The general consensus seems to be that it's refreshing to have a forum where women can express some of the issues they face, and together come up with practical ways to change things.



A scene from the first SheSays Cape Town event.

We had such a cool mix of people, from all walks of life – it was a truly diverse audience and a great testimony to the inclusive way in which SheSays have always done things.

■ ***Your upcoming August event is all about the ‘entrepreneurial side hustle’. How do you decide on speakers and topics to be covered in the individual events?***

Greeff: We ask and we listen – whenever and wherever we have the opportunity. Since the three of us started meeting and planning, we’ve had lists and lists of leads and ideas that we constantly add to.

Whenever we meet someone new that’s interested in our cause, well connected or just generally inspiring, we ask for input and we add to these lists.



A scene from the first SheSays Cape Town event.

We also ran a survey for attendees of the first event, where we asked for feedback and input on future events, and plan on doing that for every future event.

In terms of wading through all the ideas and making decisions for the actual events, let’s just say it’s like a fascinating game of Tetris: lots of moving parts, a variety of suitable options, and so many different outcomes. But it’s fun!

■ ***Sounds like it! Looking at collaborative value-adds, explain the impact of the international SheSays team’s free career advice tool, [SheSays Boom](#).***

Tokar: Boom is a recent initiative launched by SheSays global, with the vision to “build a collective of the best creative minds to help push the industry forward.”

The idea is to aggregate all the wisdom of thousands of successful women who have been involved in SheSays over the years, from around the globe.

The tool is new but as we build up content, it will become a robust destination for advice on all sorts of topics tied to professional development, from presentation skills to salary negotiation.



A scene from the first SheSays Cape Town event. From left to right, see moderator Dr Dorrian Aiken and panelists Nikki Stokes, Ingrid Jones, Tharina Haas, Sturrae Hickey and Paige Nick.

The idea is to take the essence of SheSays beyond events, so anyone, anywhere can access advice from successful women that have paved the way.

There's a crowd-sourced component to it as well, so if you're a woman in the communications field, please [go contribute your thoughts](#)! It will help us grow the platform, and we need South African representation on there.

❏ **Let's end by looking ahead to the future. What's next on the SheSays CT agenda and how can the industry get involved?**

Van As: Our focus thus far has been on hosting the first events and creating a bit of a following on social media. We are busy connecting with agency heads around Cape Town, getting their buy-in to the mission of SheSays.

We're keen to start a dialogue about how we can bridge the gender gap in the ad industry – for example, running a survey to see how many female creative directors there really are in our industry, what the male/female ratio is in studios, what the pay gap is.

“ We need to encourage young female creatives to join the industry and stay in the industry. In the UK, they call these *‘the lost girls’*. We need seniors who have left to come back. We need more female role models. We want to introduce mentorship programmes. ”

So if you're a recruiter, agency senior, female trailblazer or mentor with ideas to share, or if you want to be one of the first agencies to offer your venue for a quarterly event, get in touch at shesays.capetown@gmail.com.

That's the power of SheSays. Remember that their next event takes place on 23 August at GetSmarter. Tickets have already sold out, you can join the [waiting list on Eventbrite](#). You can also look forward to the informal, no-agenda SheSays Meetups, which will be networking drinks evenings – visit their [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) feeds for the latest details.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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