Zip Zapping to Broadway

The troupe got standing ovations after 116 performances in four countries, writes

Claire Keeton

 Bridgette Berning is sky high, wound up in silk near the top of the Zip Zap Circus arena. At breathtaking speed she spins down the 9m strips of silk and spreads her arms like a starfish, flying facedown into the hands of her troupe. Her trust in them is absolute and their catch-and-release looks effortless. Phelelani "Ree" Ndakrokra is another aerial artist at Zip Zap whose somersaults on straps high above the ground astound.

This pair has, like Zip Zap Circus itself, soared to new heights in their latest live show, MOYA, which opened off Broadway in New York City yesterday. The dress rehearsal before they flew last Friday was flawless, demonstrating that the award-winning Zip Zap belongs on world stages, just like the Moscow Circus or Cirque du Soleil with whom some of its members have performed.

"MOYA has been the biggest success you can imagine internationally. We are carrying the Zip Zap flag and the South African flag, celebrating unity and diversity in every show," said co-founder Brent van Rensburg of the show's standing ovations and encores for each of their 116 performances on recent tours. They have performed in Mauritius, the US, France and Réunion since September.

"We have gone from a dream to reality and are playing at some of the biggest venues, in name if not in size, like La Vilette in Paris," says Van Rensburg. The Zip Zap artistic director with his wife, co-founder and CEO Laurence Estève, remember their early days with about 15 kids, "a trapeze bar in a tree, a costume box and a rusty car".

Standing ovations

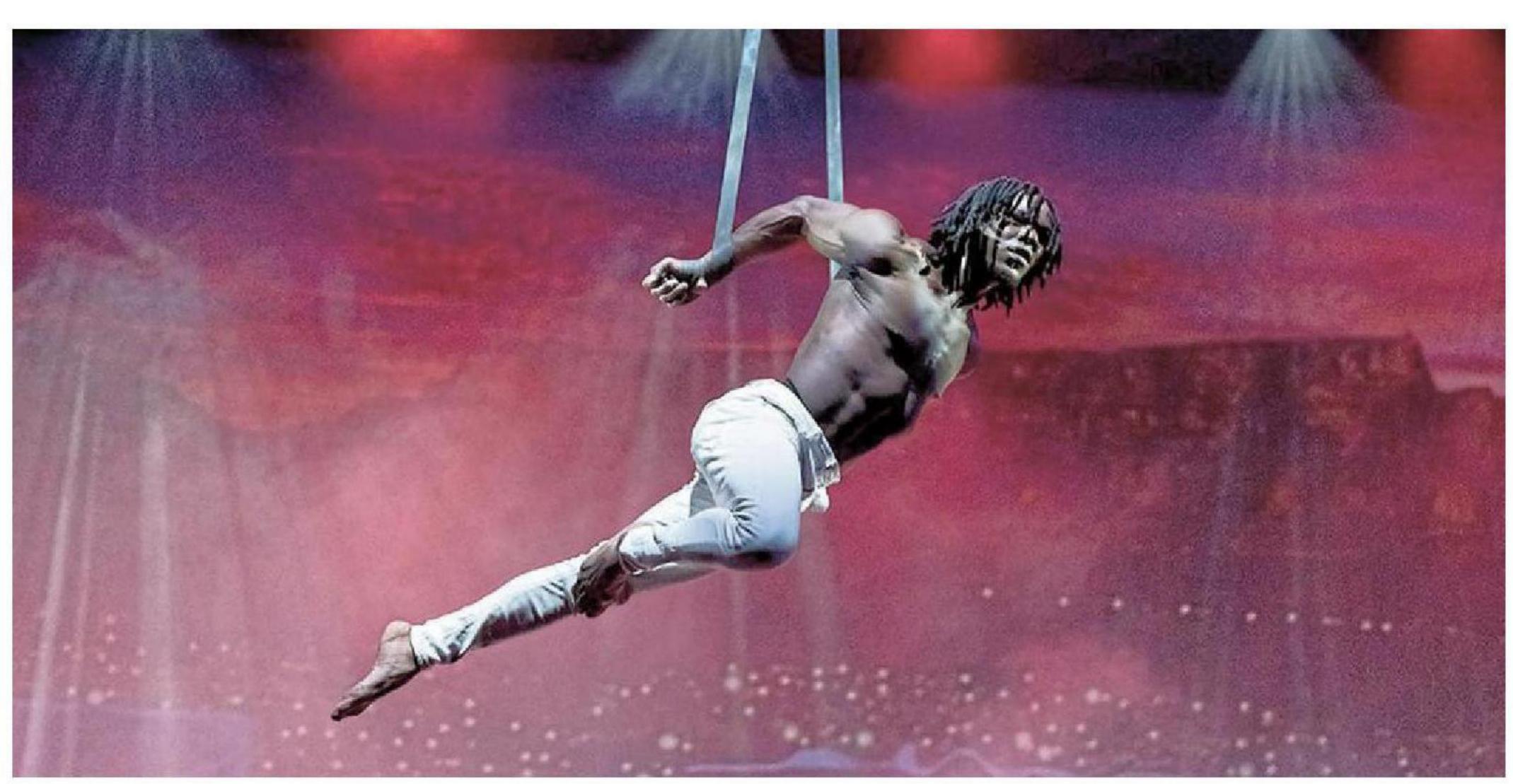
Seven years ago Zip Zap's social circus mesmerised South African audiences with their talent, creativity and passion and toured overseas, but now they have a professional touring circus which has risen to a higher orbit. "To cross the bridge from a social to professional circus is a big jump and fairly unheard of," says Van Rensburg.

This ambition has allowed Zip Zap stars to shine even brighter. MOYA's choreography showcases the troupe's skills and flair across a range of genres from the Cyr wheel, unicycle and aerial flight, to acting and dance styles including traditional gumboot and pantsula dances. The grace with which they float and spin across the stage in unison during routines is as slick as any international ballet company dancing en pointe.

Zip Zap's touring troupe contains professionals whose acts are exquisite. Take Masizakhe Kovi, a handstand artist whose sculpted body surpasses that of Michelangelo's David while performing acrobatics, balanced on spinning poles or people's hands and shoulders. His fluidity and timing are immaculate.



Brilliant handstand artist Masizakhe Kovi performs with the Zip Zap touring troupe.



Phelelani 'Ree' Ndakrokra is another aerial artist at Zip Zap whose somersaults on straps high above the ground astound. Pictures: Joan Ward

"When I joined Zip Zap at 13, I was tiny and a shy kid. But I met other young kids, different kids from different backgrounds, different races, and I came out of my shell and Zip Zap felt like home.

"I was born flexible, so circus skills came naturally to me," says Kovi, though the contortions he achieves look unnatural. At first he was performing in the circus as a hobby but in 2020 he joined Zip Zap's full-time Dare to Dream vocational programme and graduated as a professional performer.

"Touring is fun and I learn about different cultures as I go to different countries," says Kovi. "I get a chance to meet professional artists from other circuses, so touring is not just about performing but also about learning. I get different ideas so I try new skills and the show gets better."

The high-risk acrobatics performed by artists like him demand the concentration and precision of Olympic gymnasts and, when touring, they must commit to this repeatedly on the same day. The troupe performs two to



Bridgette Berning is the only woman on Zip Zap's touring troupe of 10 but feels supported by them.

three shows every day for three weeks which at first Kovi found hard. "But I got stronger and enjoyed every single moment," he says.

Berning, whose aerial arts are extreme, smiles at the audience when she gets a moment to catch her breath. The only woman in the touring troupe of 10 (nine performers and Van Rensburg), she says: "It can get a bit lonely but I'm lucky to have an incredible team with me and get their support."

Multidisciplinary performer Jason Barnard is one of the veterans of the troupe at 51 years old, the best bounce juggler in South Africa and a role model, says its artistic director. Watching him juggle up to 13 balls that arc at speed from the air to the ground and between his fellow performers is an hypnotic experience. Barnard, who exudes calm, never drops a single ball.

On stage he partners with the lead character in MOYA, Jacobus "Trompie" Claasen, who plays his own life story in the show. "This is a uniquely South African production which tells a universal story," Zip Zap trumpets of his rags-to-riches tale.

The performers earn well while on tour but above all, when interviewed, they celebrate the spirit of the Zip Zap community where they feel they belong.

Claasen lived on the streets as a kid – the opening scene reflects the steely way people on the streets treated him when begging for help – before finding a true home with Zip Zap in 2009. "You make your own choices in life. You can choose to stay on the streets forever or you can decide to step out of that life," he is quoted in the flyer for MOYA.

The quirky acrobat speaks the opening lines while Barnard narrates self-written lyrics about Claasen's trajectory to a soundtrack by Josh Hawks, the former bass guitarist for Freshlyground. The music enhances the power of each scene, with the pace shifting between reflective songs by former Freshlyground

vocalist Zolani Mahola, and soulful sax to the catchy beat of a Cape Carnival tune.

Excelling in circus disciplines and comedy, Claasen has been on multiple international tours, performed at the White House in Washington DC for Barack Obama (remember that humane president?) and for tennis legend Roger Federer.

More than 25,000 at-risk and creative children, teens and young adults have benefited from Zip Zap's training and have forged friendships across socioeconomic gaps since it launched as a nonprofit – supported by local and international funders and celebrities like Federer – 33 years ago.

Zip Zap has four outreach and five youth programmes, with about 3,000 school pupils training at its academy and headquarters in Salt River each year. Dare to Dream is its flagship programme, lasting three years like a "university of circus", which trains students to be performers, teachers and technicians, says Van Rensburg.

The troupe has a four-month tour with MOYA coming up in Europe including Germany and France, where they have countless fans. "A big contract in Paris with 94 shows in three months brought us back to speed after Covid," Van Rensburg says of a time when they cut staff salaries and had to suspend shows.

Award-winning

During the pandemic Zip Zap still managed to produce an award-winning acrobatic art movie, MOYA, on which the live show is based, co-directed by Van Rensburg's daughter Sabine, a successful circus artist in Canada. The film won three of the four awards for which it was nominated in the US, against contenders such as Cirque du Soleil, Van Rensburg says.

He hopes they will be adding Brazil and Southeast Asia to their destinations this year and expects MOYA to tour globally for five to seven years.

"The troupe is reaping the benefits," he says of their discipline and talents.

Kovi hopes that on the Broadway tour he will be enjoying "New York food and entertaining New Yorkers with our South African vibe. I'm so excited we're about to show them what we've got."

"It is a privilege to see them perform and be exposed to their positive youthful energy," said Annie Gwerengwe of the Zip Zap troupe's dress rehearsal, where the artists performed in baggy clothes, T-shirts or bare-chested on a hot day.

Stretching before leaping onto the stage, Barnard put it this way: "When you step into the building it is not about what you are wearing that matters, what colour or size you are, or where you are from that counts, but what you can put on the table for everyone to share. Zip Zap is not materialistic, what counts is whether you are willing to go the extra mile for everyone."

* Zip Zap artists Akho Narwele, Bridgette Berning, Jacobus Claassen. Jason Barnard, Luqmaan Benjamin, Masizakhe Kovi, Matthew Risk, Phelelani Ndakrokra and Vuyani Lottering will be performing in 'MOYA' at the New Victory Theatre off Broadway until April 26.