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BUSINESS DAILY

Tuesday
September 23, 2014

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Festival celebrates African stories through music, dance and poetry

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RATING



From left: Dr Auma Obama is this year's Storymoja Festival patron; Muthoni Garland, founder of Storymoja Festival; and Nobel Prize winning author Wole Soyinka will give the Wangari Maathai memorial lecture. PHOTOS | MARGARETTA WA GACHERU

By Margaretta wa Gacheru

Posted Thursday, September 18 2014 at 15:50

IN SUMMARY

- Inspired by the Hay Festival that she first attended back in 2007 in the UK, what thrilled Muthoni most was seeing creativity on display in such a fabulously multi-faceted way. All aspects of artistic expression were present at Hay, although its primary focus had originally been literary.

Celebrating African stories through the spoken or written words to music, dance and performance has been Muthoni Garland's greatest joy for the past six years, ever since she first launched the Storymoja Festival back in 2008.

Inspired by the Hay Festival that she first attended back in 2007 in the UK, what thrilled Muthoni most was seeing creativity on display in such a fabulously multi-faceted way. All aspects of artistic expression were present at Hay, although its primary focus had originally been literary.

And just as Hay was initially organised around books and published writers, so was the original Storymoja Festival. But for Muthoni, the vision of her festival has evolved over time.

This year, she still focuses on writers and books,

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workshops and panels that allow audiences to get up close and personal with the writers we admire. But from the beginning, Muthoni has had another objective beyond giving creative expression free reign at the festival.

It is her emphasis on African storytelling, which is why so many writers are coming this year from all over Africa and the Diaspora. That “tradition” was established from the outset, but this year the numbers are unprecedented.

As many as 44 acclaimed writers are coming from around the region—from Southern and West Africa, to North and Eastern Africa. They are also arriving from North America, Europe and the Caribbean as well as from India, Nepal and the Philippines.

Soyinka

What’s more, Kenya has a contingent of more than 100 writers, performing and visual artists, including Auma Obama who is this year’s festival patron.

The undoubted highlight of the festival is the coming of the Nobel Prize winner, writer Wole Soyinka who Muthoni had invited years back, but this time round, it was Soyinka not Muthoni who was keen to come to the festival, primarily to celebrate and commemorate the life and works of the late Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor who died tragically during the Westgate attack.

A year ago, Muthoni chose to cancel the festival midstream as soon as she received word that Awoonor was one of the casualties of Westgate. Seriously shaken by his demise, she had considered cancelling the festival altogether. But everyone, including Soyinka knew this would be wrong, and to prove the wisdom of continuing, he offered to come this year for two days.

On Friday night, he will be present at the festival’s charity gala at the Nairobi National Museum—where all 175 events will take place over five days. Then on Saturday, Soyinka will deliver the Wangari Maathai Memorial Lecture at 11am in the museum’s Dome.

Tonight’s gala will feature music by Eric Wainaina and “the best band in Africa”. A ticket will go for Sh6,000 and all the proceeds from the event will benefit Storymoja’s Start a Library project, which has already established more than 50 libraries in schools around the country and aims to equip every school with books and a library.

“You don’t need a building to start a library,” she said. All you need is a few shelves and a cupboard with a padlock to keep the books,” she added. Clearly passionate about her “reading revolution” and ideally equipping every Kenyan child with a love of literacy, Muthoni not only writes children’s books herself, (her latest being Attack of the Shidas, which is being staged several times during the festival by The Theatre Company) and publishing other writers’ books.

She also promotes the production of kids’ books by Kenyans through the regular running of writing workshops. She’s even enhanced the publishing side of Storymoja in order to make her books available to children across Kenya.

Another highlight of the festival will be workshops and master classes on everything from writing for children, etiquette, guerilla marketing to digital publishing, writing both fiction and non-fiction and critiquing stories constructively.

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