

PROFILE

COMPILED BY JOANNA STERKOWICZ

Thirty years On

By Joanna Sterkowicz

Regarded as one of the top commercials directors in both South Africa and the world, Keith Rose's extraordinarily illustrious career spans three decades, dating back to the dark days of apartheid when South Africa was subject to boycotts.



BMW Mouse



Toyota Soapbox



ICONIC PORTFOLIO – Keith Rose

“I never wanted to leave South Africa – I always wanted everyone in the world to come here,” said Keith Rose in a career retrospective presented at the recent Design Indaba in Cape Town.

During his presentation, Rose screened his best known commercials from different stages in his career. Each commercial drew large cheers from the 1 500-strong crowd at the Design Indaba, attesting to the popularity of the Rose portfolio. Iconic commercials such as *IBM Elephants* (an elephant and her baby traversing steep dunes in the desert to the sounds of *The Long and Winding Road*); *Toyota Soapbox* (a group of young boys embarking on a dicey go-cart race down a perilous cliff-side road); *Dunlop Greyhounds* (a sturdy Staffordshire bull terrier competing in a greyhound race); and *Golf The Right Stuff* (a rookie test pilot tests the new Golf round an airfield and wins his wings), to name a few.

Television was introduced into South Africa in the mid-1970s but only went commercial at the end of that decade. “In those days there were no such things as advertising schools or film schools so there was nowhere to learn

your craft,” said Rose. “South African commercials were just starting out and a few British directors came out here to show us how to do it. My first five years’ work was naïve and just plain bad.”

In the mid 1980s big budget cigarette ads were all the rage. Continued Rose: “British directors like Ridley Scott (*Aliens*), Hugh Hudson (*Chariots of Fire*) and Adrian Lyne (*Fatal Attraction*) all got their start in commercials, shooting \$1m ads and turning the commercials industry on its head. That was the start of the Golden Age.

“However, things were not so great in South Africa at that time, because of apartheid-era sanctions. The only international contact we had was the yearly visit to the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival in France. Added to which, South African directors were lured overseas and corporates pulled work out of the country.”

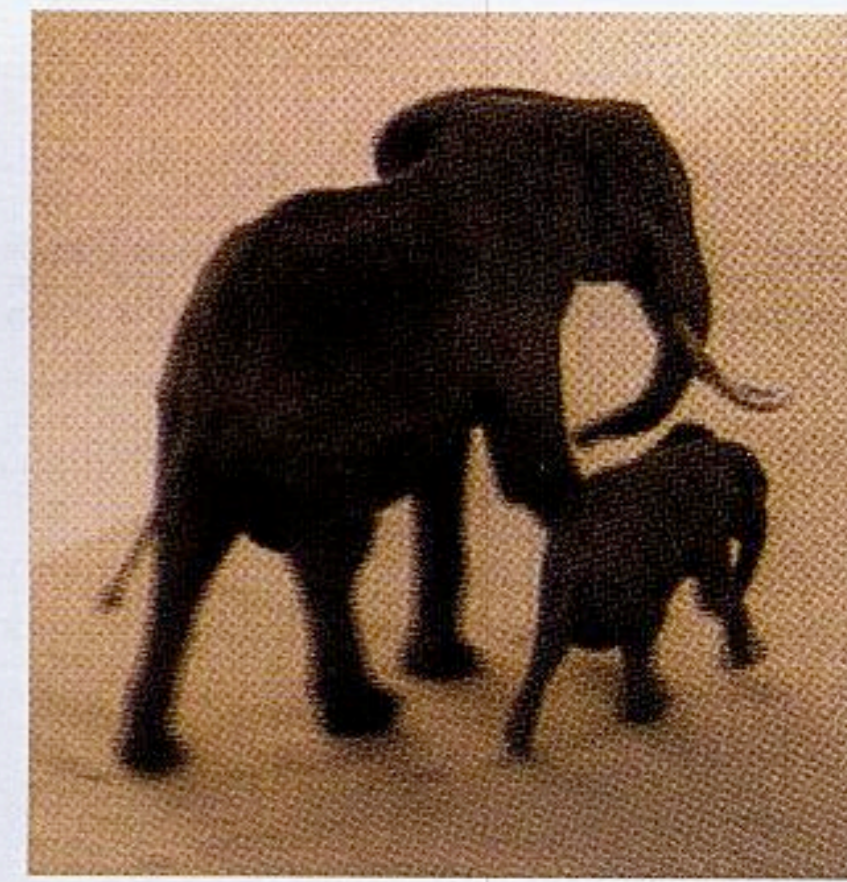
Rose decided to turn the negative into the positive and announced his intention of making the move from DOP to director. “It was at that time that I did *IBM Elephants*. Sourcing a really well-trained elephant proved very

difficult and we eventually found our star, Jabu, in the US and brought her back here. We shot the commercial in harsh light in the desert as I wanted to convey the emotion of a tough struggle. After all, the ad was about IBM leaving South Africa.”

Rose’s *Mercedes Chapman’s Peak* commercial was the first South African ad to win a Gold Lion at Cannes and the one that got South Africa noticed. “We designed and built a cage for the car and created a remote-control system. It took us four days to shoot and we had six cars going off the cliff.”

With ads like this, as well as the evocative *Toyota Soapbox* and *Golf The Right Stuff*, clients starting trusting local directors more. Said Rose: “Our work became bolder, budgets got bigger and I shot some ads overseas such as the SAA Cost Cutters Europe ads. In the Early 1990s I acquired an international partner, Barry Munchick, and Velocity Films was born. Then came my ‘Blue Period.’”

Enter *BMW Mercury* for the then new agency on the block, Hunt Lascaris. Achieving the effect of a blob of mercury smoothly travelling over a woman’s body proved very challenging.



IBM Elephants

“We imported our own animation machine and it needed special clearance at customs because it was capable of building a nuclear bomb. The ad took 18 months to do – we were a year over schedule and therefore deep in trouble. So as payback we took on the job of turning a print campaign into a TV ad and the result was *BMW Mouse*. We trained a mouse for six weeks so that it would run along the top of a rotating steering wheel. It took four hours to shoot. *Mouse* was the most awarded car ad to date – it won two Gold Lions and was inducted into the Clios TV Hall of Fame. That was the start of our golden years.”

Rose made the point that a commercials director’s commitment has to be total and that sometimes you pay a price. After 20 years in the game without a break, Rose could see the cracks starting to appear. He took a year off to spend with his family.

“Coming back after a year was not easy as there were talented new kids on the block and new favourites. So I re-launched my career with two Sony Playstation ads. But I knew that I had to take on fewer ads and be more selective. I needed to challenge myself and please myself. There were new trends so I needed to change everything.”

Ads such as *Coronation Vincent*, which shows tragic artist Vincent van Gogh’s life in Van Gogh-like tableaux and colours, proved that Rose had come back stronger than ever. As does the more recent *Allan Gray Beautiful*, about a little boy who gets beaten up protecting a little girl in the belief that she will grow up as beautiful as her mother.

During his career Rose has won a cupboard full of awards – seven Cannes Gold Lions, awards from D&ADS, Art Director’s Club, One Show, Clios and the New York Festival. He is listed in Shots’ 100 Advertising People of all time and is accredited by Campaign Magazine to be amongst the Top Five Directors Globally. Rose has also been inducted into The Creative Circle Hall of Fame.

“Do awards matter?” said Rose in conclusion. “Of course they do. It’s amazing to be recognised by your peers. People always ask me what my favourite ad is and I tell them – the one I’m working on.”