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.

"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 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 Clay 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 freedoms. 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 Allen 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&AD, 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."