

They came in pink, they saw and they conquered the crowds



Miss Mardi Gras 2016 Vida Fantabisher in red at the street parade on Saturday.

KNYSNA NEWS - The Pink Loerie Mardi Gras & Arts Festival is unquestionably a global highlight with momentous events: last year it was Mr Gay World and this year it was same-sex weddings, the first of its kind in Africa. This annual glittery experience started on Wednesday, April 27 and ended on Sunday, May 1.

The Pink Party:

First on the list was the Pink Party at the Knysna Fine Art gallery, with the attendants enjoying the exhibition titled Transmutation, Alchemy of Art with a drink in hand and networking with locals and guests from other parts of the country who either came to "tie the knot" or enjoy the fiesta.

Capetonians Thembisa Mhlawuli and Yonela Nce, who were among the couples planning to tie the knot on Friday, April 29, said the mass wedding was a pre-test run and that they were excited. "Who wouldn't want to be part of this?" Mhlawuli wondered.

Gallery assistant Philip Heijnen explained, "The festivities are all about celebrating what sets us apart, and it's beautiful."

Another firm favourite on this year's programme was the Queens of Wigstock, a cabaret-style show featuring some of the country's top drag artists, who performed for two hours at Zanzibar Night Club from Wednesday to Saturday.

The show is a South African adaptation of the legendary American Wigstock that was first launched in New York in 1985. It has since become a culture in itself and brought recognition and attention to the art of drag. The original festival, held on America's Labor Day, was the unofficial end-of-summer celebration for the gay community of New York. Among the performers who took to the stage in Knysna were Shannin Brown, Olivia Mae, Betty Bangles, Manila Von Teez and Victoria Styles.

This exceptional occasion took place at Villa Castollini, one of Knysna's tourist attractions with an exquisite view in Brenton-On-Sea. It was rainy and cold weather but that did not dampen the flamboyance of the occasion.

The first wedding of its kind on the African continent, Pastor Andre Muller led the ceremony during which 16 same-sex couples were to tie the knot to signify the festival's 16 years of existence, but only 15 couples were wed after one couple did not show up for the ceremony.

"Fill every day with wonderful memories," said Muller. "When you reach older age, these memories are what you have."

Speaking to the Knysna-Plett Herald later, Muller explained that he started officiating same-sex weddings in South Africa when it was still illegal, and "I have been following the struggle ever since". He said it feels good being part of South Africa's restructuring social landscape. "Marriage is not about religion," Muller continued. "It's about celebrating love between two people."

He emphasised the concept that love knows no colour, no gender, age and "definitely no sexuality, love is a celebration". said Muller.

Anna-Marie and Belinda van Eck from Cape Town were one of the couples who got married. Anna-Marie said, "The first time we got married our marriage was not recognised by the law, so this is the first time we are legally married and I must say it's an awesome experience."

Knysna deputy mayor Esmer Edge and partner Julie Seton renewed their vows during the mass wedding. "We are usually private people but we're excited to share our great day with everyone here. This is a sign of our commitment to each other and to our town," said Edge. The delighted couple also revealed that they would be changing their last names to Jeffery's, Esme's maiden name. Yoliswa Gciliashane, one of their entourage, said, "It is amazing to witness so many people who are committed to each other exchanging their vows and being part of history. I am excited for them."

VIP dinner & fundraising auction:

At 18:00 on April 28, Villa Castollini hosted a VIP dinner and fundraising event that provided guests the opportunity to wine and dine, and spend some money for a good cause.

Greg Vogt, tourism body Knysna & Partners' chief executive, welcomed guests and congratulated the newlyweds. In his welcome, he also offered his condolences to one of the Pink Loerie Festival's founders, Richard Dawson, whose lifetime partner Dr Colin Lang passed away last week.

Executive mayor Georlene Wolmarans, in her speech, and after welcoming the guests, spoke about the challenges the town faces, and made mention of old age home and frail-care facility Vermont Centre owing the municipality R180 000. Then she, too, offered her condolences to Dawson for his loss.

When it was his turn to speak, Dawson said, "I am not here to mourn him [Colin Lang], I am here to celebrate his life."

Shortly after the formalities were out of the way, the Knysna-Plett Herald found out that a couple from Mossel Bay had offered to pay Vermont Centre's debt but wished to remain anonymous.

"Please, we do not want publicity; we saw a need and we have more than enough, so we will pay R200 000 and see how we can be of help in future.

"We decided to help because the mayor asked us to help; she has been there for us in the past as the gay community."

Pageant Queens and Kings:

Right after the VIP dinner came one of the highlights of the festival, the crowning of Mr Mardi Gras and Miss Mardi Gras. The beauty pageants left the audience entertained with their dance moves and magazine-cover bodies.

Miss Mardi Gras 2016 is Vida Fantabisher and Mr Mardi Gras 2016 is Alexander Steyn.

A remarkable aspect of the dazzling jamboree is the street parade. Feathers, glitter and out-of-this-world costumes were the order of the day on Knysna's main street on Saturday, April 30. The newlyweds were also in the crowd, holding hands and stealing kisses here and there. The weather was exquisite and locals stood on the pavements and watched the parade in amusement.



Mr Mardi Gras 2016 Alexander Steyn parades for the crowd.



Capetonians Thembisa Mhlawuli (left) and Yonela Nce (right) were also at the Pink Loerie mass same-sex wedding to say their vows.



The street parade in full swing on Saturday.

ARTICLE: NWABISA PONDOYI & YOLANDE STANDER, KNYSNA-PLETT HERALD *'We bring you the latest Knysna, Garden Route news'*



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