

"Diversity... and a healthy dose of honesty" - judging insights with Steph van Niekerk

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Cannes Lions and its official representative in South Africa, Ster-Kinekor recently announced this year's jury. With one week to go until two years' worth of Lion-winning work is awarded, we touched base with some of the local jury members for a preview of what to expect. Next up, Steph van Niekerk.



Steph van Niekerk

Steph van Niekerk, creative director at Grey Africa, is on this year's Cannes Lions Industry Craft Lions jury.

One of the country's top creative talents, Van Niekerk was ranked as both number one Creative Director and Copywriter in South Africa in 2019, as well as runner-up Woman of the Year in 2020.

She is passionate about making insight-driven work that moves people and explores the human condition in all its beauty, imperfection, fragility and hilarity.



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Here, Van Niekerk shares what she's most looking forward to from this year's judging, sharing a few of her Cannes Lions-related highlights over the years and what SA judges bring to the global creative mix...

■ Tell us more about yourself and why you believe you were selected – your judging experience and so on.

I've been in the industry for 21 years and during that time I've worked at most of the country's top agencies. I've learnt from the best, honed my craft as a copywriter and won a good couple of awards. In the last few years I've been receiving invitations to judge locally at the Loeries and this year - yes a Covid year - I am judging internationally for the first time.

“ I’ve just finished One Show, Radio and Audio and I’m very excited to move onto my first Cannes judging gig. I guess judging is a right of passage and I guess it was time for me to step up. I’m not sure how it happened, but I’m grateful it did. ”

■ **Where were you when you found out you’d be one of this year’s Cannes Lions jurors, and what was your reaction to the news?**

LOL... The irony is that I’ve waited 21 years for an international judging gig and when it finally happens, it happens right here in my lounge! So yes, I was in my lounge. I’m always in my lounge these days. Of course I’m bummed that I won’t be traveling to Cannes this year, but I’m thrilled and honoured to finally see what goes down behind the scenes and to have a chance to sit and talk about the best work in the world with some of the best creative minds in the world.

■ **Following the postponement of last year’s awards, the juries will be judging both years’ of work and awarding Lions for 2020 and 2021. Firstly, how did you respond to the news of the postponement and how do you feel about judging two-years’ worth of work?**

I think we all felt Cannes’ absence last year. Cannes is very much a highlight of every creative’s calendar. It is a chance for all the hard work and pain to pay off (or not). Either way, it’s a bit of excitement amid the Teams calls and keynotes. Very happy that it’s back and that we’re judging two years’ work. The economic impact of the pandemic has impacted the number of entries, so even though it’s two years’ worth of work, it will probably be equal to a normal years’ entries.

■ **Share a few of your favourite Cannes Lions-related moments over the years – either from attending personally or agency winning work-related.**

My ultimate Cannes memory must be 2019. I was not supposed to be in Cannes at all. I had just changed agencies and there was no way I would have been able to go if it wasn’t for two of my friends at 7 Films who insisted on taking me along. It just so happened that I was there when City Lodge ‘The Real Cost of Being Zulu’ (Radio) won Gold, and Pete Khoury went above and beyond to ‘smuggle’ me into the awards ceremony without a pass to collect the award on stage. Standing on the Cannes stage with the South African flag with Pete and pictures of all our colleagues was one of the most surreal and wonderful moments of my life!

■ **What do you believe SA creatives bring to the global Cannes Lions judging mix?**

Diversity. Diversity in background and perspective, and a healthy dose of honesty. South Africans are great storytellers and they have much to offer international juries.

■ **Give us a glimpse of the specific criteria you’re looking for in judging this year’s entries.**

I’ll be looking for great ideas brought to life with beautiful craft and skill. Ultimately Cannes is there to inspire and to push the industry forward to new heights, so as always that work should rise to the top.

■ **Any predictions of trends that are likely to stand out at Cannes Lions 2021?**

As with last year, I expect the winning work to fall into two camps: social justice issues and humour. Although, coming off One Show it seems the lighter work is rising to the top. I think the industry - and the rest of the world - is appreciating a break from the heaviness that has been our reality for more than a year.

■ **Lastly, what are you most looking forward to from Cannes Lions 2021?**

Being able to see how it all works behind the scenes and in the jury rooms and to discuss some of the best work in the world with a panel of very smart international judges. Judging - I’ve realised - is a masterclass in creativity. I have much to learn and I hope to take some of the learnings back to my teams at Grey.

The winners will be announced during Cannes Lions Live, a fully digital experience, running from 21 to 25 June 2021. Visit our [Cannes Lions special section](#) for the latest updates!

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