



A Boat With a Cause

Cape Town has a new resident: the Whisper Ball. Peacefully toddling through the waterways of the V&A Waterfront and showing tourists around, this giant floating soccer ball is a one of a kind vessel made by a one of a kind initiative, reports **Miriam Mannak**.

IN THE HEART OF Khayelitsha, Cape Town's largest township, a dozen youngsters wearing white overalls are frantically polishing what looks like the mould of a small boat. Unlike the stereotypical teenagers, the boys and girls are doing their work in utter silence. There is no chatting, no laughing, no giggling, no joking, and not even whispering – just the soft whooshing of cloths against the shiny

surface. Strange? Not really. The young boat builders to be are all deaf.

Five years ago the Whisper Boat Building Academy (WBBA), the brainchild of Peter Jacops from Belgium, welcomed its first batch of future boat builders. Working together with and situated next door to the Noluthando School for Deaf in Khayelitsha, Whisper Boats provides a training course of two to three years to deaf youngsters who'd like to master what

Jacops calls the art of boat building.

The concept for the WBBA was born shortly after Jacops, a European Union marine surveyor by trade, settled down in South Africa's Mother City in 2004. "As I have a special bond with boats and the ocean I became interested in the local boat building industry. One of the things I noticed was that this growing industry was struggling with a shortage of skilled boat builders," he says.

It is estimated that Cape Town's boat-building industry grows by 10 per cent annually.

"I also noticed the high levels of unemployment and lack of skills among young people," Jacops adds.

Jacops is right. According to the latest statistics, 40 per cent of young South Africans between 16 and 25 are unemployed and do not go to school. This is much higher than the average unemployment figure of 25 per cent.

"DISABLED YOUNGSTERS have an even bigger problem, as there are not a lot of facilities that cater for them. That is why they often end up weaving baskets or welding barbeques as a way to earn money or learn a skill. Of course there is nothing wrong with that, but to me it is not enough to empower people. A handicap should not prevent someone from obtaining a skill or a trade that is in high demand and thus crucial to the economy."

So far 10 students have graduated from WBBA, and all of them found a fulltime job. Jacops is hopeful about the future of the 12 current students. "There is a huge demand for boat builders, and among the poor communities there is a huge demand for work. We are tackling both."

I ask Jacops about the choice of name for his school. "We are a very silent school, and not only because our students are deaf," he explains. "We for instance put electrical engines in our motorboats. This type of engine is much quieter than engines that run on petrol. The noise produced by petrol engines is not only disturbing to people, but also to birds and other marine life."

In November 2008, Whisper Boats delivered an electrical engine to the Two Oceans Aquarium at the V&A Waterfront. The device enables the aquarium's staff to remove plastic and fishing lines that often entangle seals in the harbour.

According to Vincent Calder, technical manager of the Aquarium, approaching the animals can be tricky if there is a lot of

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noise involved. "The seals are often injured and stressed, and therefore more alert to danger," he says. "The trickiest part of getting these entanglements off is being able to get close without scaring off the seal. This engine is very quiet, which allows us to get close without being detected."

I ask about the day-to-day challenges.

Without thinking too long, Jacops replies: "One of the challenges is obviously working with people who cannot hear or speak and only use sign language to communicate. Although I have done a basic sign language course, communication between the students and I is limited."

Interestingly enough, the language



Peter Jacops founded the Whisper Boat Building Academy (WBBA) after he moved to Cape Town in 2004. Jacops has always had an interest in boat building and noticed a shortage of skilled labour in that sector.



All the students are deaf but they pick up skills very quickly. All the graduates have found jobs in Cape Town's boat-building industry.



WBBA is situated close to and works with the Noluthando School for Deaf in Khayelitsha.

barrier does not pose any major problems. "We have gotten into the habit of showing our students step by step how we want to have things done," Jacops explains. "Most of them are very fast learners. We often have to explain things only once or twice, depending on the student's educational level. What's interesting is that certain technical boat building terms do not exist in sign language. We literally had to invent these words."

Jacops adds that he would love to hire an interpreter that is specialised in the local Xhosa sign language. "English sign language differs from French or in this case Xhosa sign language. In addition, many deaf youngsters have developed their own sign language. To communicate properly we'd really like to have someone that speaks the local sign language. Unfortunately, we cannot afford this. Keeping WBBA afloat has been a mission last year. Due to the crisis the number of orders from Europe and the US, where the bulk of our clients live, has decreased significantly."

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AS A result of the crisis, Whisper Boats had to close down its second workshop near Cape Town's harbour, which served as the training location for advanced students. "We simply had to reduce our operational costs to carry on. Even now, with our one workshop in Khayelitsha, it is difficult: at the moment, our monthly

BOAT BUILDING FACTS:

- Over the past six years, the boat-building industry in the Western Cape has grown by approximately 10 per cent per year.
- In 2006, the industry contributed almost 1.5 billion rand to the national economy.
- The industry employs 4,200 people directly and in excess of 4,000 are employed indirectly – compared to a workforce of 2,000 in 2001.
- About 85 per cent of all boat-building factories in South Africa are situated in Cape Town. Other manufacturing hubs are in the Durban area and St Francis Bay in the Eastern Cape.
- According to the Cape Town Boatbuilding Initiative (CTBi), South Africa is the second-largest producer of catamarans in the world after France.
- In the 1990s, South Africa's global market share in the catamaran sector was less than one per cent. In 2006, that share was 28 per cent. This means that one in three catamarans in the world over 30 foot are made in South Africa.
- At the Miami Boat Show in 2007, South African catamaran manufacturers were well represented – with almost 50 per cent of catamarans shown coming from South African.

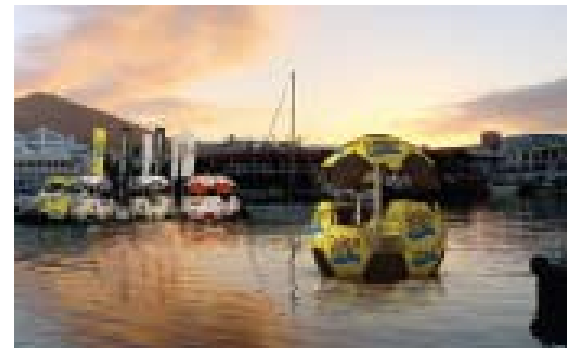
“The Whisper Balls can be adapted to suit any event or theme, and we can fit them with a heating system or air conditioning when needed. We can also change the look of our Whisper Balls, by making them look like tennis balls, golf balls, smiley faces, or even planet earth.



Boat building work is non gender-specific and there is a good balance between male and female workers.

costs are approximately \$4,500. This includes the salaries of our teachers and other employees, material costs, and rental of premises. This is a lot of money, especially when you do not get orders. But we hope for the best in 2010 and are not giving up.”

DESPITE THE financial problems, WBBA last year embarked on a new project: the Whisper Ball. Powered by an electrical engine and in the shape of a huge soccer ball this eight-passenger vessel has been deployed in Cape Town's V&A Waterfront. “It can be hired for sight seeing trips as well as advertising. Our first client was the Dutch embassy,” Jacops says.



Whisper Balls provide a novel and peaceful way of exploring Cape Town's V&A Waterfront.

The idea to build the round vessels is linked to the 2010 World Cup, which takes place in South Africa in June and July. “However, it is a long-term project as we have a five-year contract with the Waterfront. In addition, the Whisper Balls can be adapted to suit any event or theme, and we can fit them with a heating system or air conditioning when needed. We can also change the look of our Whisper Balls, by making them look like tennis balls, golf balls, smiley faces, or even planet earth,” Jacops explains.

“But for the time being in Cape Town, they are soccer balls. It is one of the best ways to explore Cape Town's Waterfront. It's peaceful and relaxed, without the noise spoiling the beauty of this city.” ■