

Anant Singh

"My view on what makes a good movie and what makes a successful movie is something that is fresh. Something that is interesting, that you can give audiences an experience that hopefully they can come out of it having enjoyed something, whether it's commercial or artistic, either of those parameters, to give them something that is new." - Anant Singh.



This week 21 ICONS South Africa shines the spotlight on the fifteenth icon of its second season: Anant Singh, South Africa's pre-eminent film producer with a passion for film, he is a visionary producer and a pioneer in the filmmaking industry. As one of the country's leading filmmakers, he's produced more than 75 films, including the acclaimed *Long Walk to Freedom*, and is a true movie-making entrepreneur.

The portrait features Singh as he stands next to a projector in a projection room, a reference to his lifelong role as a pioneer in the South African film industry.

In an intimate conversation, Singh talks about his life as a film producer. Captivated by the moving image at the tender age of eight, Singh believed that the silent movies of Charlie Chaplain, Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy were truly magical and inspired his love for film.

21 ICONS is a showcase for the South African spirit; a tribute to the men and women who have helped to shape our country and, indeed, our world. The series is part of an annual project which features unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, one of the continent's pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers.

Passion for the movies

Born and raised in Durban, Singh worked part-time in a film hire store while in high school, rewinding movies for R1 a day. His father owned an 8mm camera and as a family they used to congregate on the couch and watch home movies.

Initially an engineering student, as the only film school was for white people, his passion for the movies never waned and at 18 he took over a business, renting out films and projectors to the public.

Singh reveals how his film career expanded when he purchased a 16mm movie rental store. Withdrawing from university he

turned his attention to video distribution, forming a company called Videovision Entertainment and in 1984, moved into film production with the film *A Place of Weeping*, directed by Darrell Roodt. "I think the whole film cost R50,000 to make and it got released theatrically in many countries in the world. It was a technically flawed film, but it had a lot of heart, and the emotional aspect of it was what engaged audiences everywhere."

Start of his career

This was the start of an illustrious career and a selection of his subsequent feature films include, among others, the critically acclaimed *Sarafina*, starring Whoopi Goldberg, Leleti Khumalo and Miriam Makeba; a film adaptation of Alan Paton's revered novel *Cry the Beloved Country*; *Paljas*, an Afrikaans film directed by Katinka Heyns, and *Yesterday*, which was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 77th Academy Awards in 2005.

"Of all the big films we've been involved in, *Sarafina* was one of the big event films that we did just after Madiba was released because it celebrated his journey in a very different way. Subsequently we released *Cry the Beloved Country* which I had bought the rights to during the 80s with the view that once Apartheid was destroyed, that the movie should be made. Alan Paton wrote this amazing book, and at the end of the book he says that the emancipation and the freedom will come, but whether it will take a thousand years, he doesn't know. For me that was the day that I decided I have to now proceed with this film. *Yesterday* was the first film we produced in indigenous language, and it was the first South African film to be nominated for an Academy Award".

Thrilled by the idea of producing, Singh says "With *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* it took almost 25 years from idea to fruition. I didn't mind that, it was frustrating at times, but ultimately, as Madiba says, it always seems impossible until it's done. So, on that premise I soldiered on."

Work on *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, started while Madiba was in prison. "I was writing him to ask him about making a movie about his life. He was very modest and said, "Does anyone want to see a movie about me?" By the time Madiba's autobiography came out he had seen *Sarafina*, and had come to the premiere of *Cry the Beloved Country* and he then said to me, "You are the person I want to make this movie."

Trusting Singh with his story and his journey, this huge film was a worldwide success and fortunately Mandela was able to see it come to life before he passed on.

About 21 Icons South Africa

21 ICONS South Africa is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the

pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.

Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.



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