

Sandra Prinsloo

"I think acting is telling people stories, telling important stories and hoping to change people through stories." - Sandra Prinsloo

The acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa has featured the 21st and final icon of its second season: Sandra Prinsloo, South Africa's doyenne of the stage and screen.



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.

Steirn comments, "I've met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful - it's a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them."

Steirn's portrait of Prinsloo appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster. The beautiful portrait included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. She has nominated a charity of her choice to be the recipient of the funds.

It features Prinsloo kissing a shadow projected on a white background, which depicts the kiss she shared with fellow icon, John Kani, during apartheid in the Athol Fugard play *Miss Julie*.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Sandra Prinsloo talks about her life as a stage and screen actress, with a career spanning decades.

Realising her calling

"I was a ballet dancer from a very early age, and I remember when I was in high school that I occasionally ushered at the Breytenbach Theatre in Pretoria. And that's the first time I came into contact with professional stage acting, but I never

thought that I'd be an actress, it wasn't something that I ever thought I would do. I think I was far too shy in those days to ever think that I could be an actress. So it wasn't like I had this great big burning passion to become an actress, not at all. I preferred an academic life, in a way. When I went to university I thought that was going to be what I was going to do."

After matriculating from Afrikaans Meisies Hoërskool, she completed her BA Honours in Drama at the University of Pretoria, joining the Performing Arts Council Transvaal Afrikaans acting company on completion of her studies. "One night we were performing and it was as if something absolutely magical happened, it was as if a golden net had cast down and everything was magical that evening and everybody felt it in the cast and they all came to stand backstage in the wings to watch and no one went back to their dressing rooms. It was something enchanting that happens in the exchange of the energy between the audience and the actors."

After that night she realised that this was her calling and she couldn't imagine any other place where you could live in such magic even if it is for just an hour or two.

Excited about the work that the first multi-racial theatre did, Prinsloo joined the Market Theatre and became increasingly aware of the political divide. She told Steirn that she had a lot of anger directed towards the Afrikaners. "Being an Afrikaner and being part of that, and thinking that I don't want to be part of this."

She said it is truly incredible how our nation has changed and how far we've come. "Now I am proud to be an Afrikaner, but in those days I did not say that and I did not feel proud, and if I had to choose a language - I worked in English for many years, maybe because of that, because I didn't identify myself with the Afrikaner race in a way."

Controversial career

Besides Prinsloo's popularity as an actress and artist, her career has not been without controversy, and her involvement with and concern for the racial situation in South Africa is well known beyond the borders of this country. Her appearance in the title role of 'Miss Julie' opposite black actor John Kani in 1985 was met with bomb threats and violent assaults. She was the first South African white actress to appear on stage in love scenes with a black actor and as a result, was ostracised by many of her countrymen.

"I thought it would cause a stir, but I didn't think it would cause a minor revolution. People were very small minded and I suppose one lives in a bit of a fool's paradise when you are an actor, you live in a very free thinking environment that is very supportive and so I knew it was going to cause a stir because a lot of things used to cause a uproar in those days."

"I knew Kani well, and we often talked about racism. I was always against it, and found it very hurtful that people experienced such discrimination; especially working at the Market Theatre, which was all-embracing. I felt ashamed."

Over her career she has performed leading roles in the plays of renowned dramatists - both local and international - totalling over 100 different productions to date. She has also successfully tried her hand at directing, and as a television host; and has won a host of national and international awards in recognition of her skills.

Amongst her movie roles is the female lead in *Tigers Don't Cry* opposite Anthony Quinn; and the memorable, *The God's Must Be Crazy*, which had tremendous international success.

Her television roles range from the well-loved television soapbox series' like *Egoli*, to classic plays like Chekov's *The Seagull*. For her role in Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice*, Sandra received a Television Award for Best Performance. The television production of Strindberg's *Miss Julie* was screened in most European countries.

The beloved star of South African stage and screen was granted the Order of Ikhamanga by President Jacob Zuma for her "excellent contribution in the field of the performing arts, and applying her talents in the creative arts to take a stand against racism".

Direction of South Africa's art

Prinsloo feels very passionately about the arts in South Africa and she echoes the words that were spoken at the inaugural 21 Icons Campus Dialogue earlier this year where the spotlight was turned on 'What role has the arts played in advancing the Constitution?' Gita Pather, Director of the Wits Theatre said the war against apartheid was articulated through the words of playwrights, novelists, poets, through the lyrics and melodies of musicians, through the storytelling of a plethora of artistes and art forms. And they suffered - were banned and beaten; silenced and even murdered; and through all this the arts continued to play a pivotal role.

Explaining to Steirn the direction that South Africa's arts need to take, Prinsloo said that, "I think it is healthy in South Africa in terms of the talent but it is not healthy in terms of finance. We need government funding. I think it's one of my personal crusades! Actors and singers, dancers and musicians are all still freelancing and hanging around as they have no home to go to, they have no security. They're very much like gypsies travelling around and I think it's an unhealthy state for us to be in. Eventually the artists run out of steam and become depressed and we lose a lot of talent. In the opera world and the music world we are losing a lot of talent to Europe and America wherever they find work. It's too hard in South Africa, and there is no support, it's just too hard to always have to battle."

It is evident that the arts have, for a long time, been at the vanguard in the struggle against social injustices such as oppression and xenophobia by laying bare unpalatable societal truths. Art will continue to play a major role in helping South Africans address prejudicial attitudes to create a more inclusive society and be the mouthpiece for the masses on socio-economic issues and transformation.

Programme synopsis

Sandra Prinsloo chats to Adrian Steirn about her stage and film career which spans a period of 45 years. She ascribes her love of acting for her stellar reputation as an outstanding actress in many countries including England, France, Germany and the United States. She has also been recognised, according to *De Kat* magazine, as one of the 100 most influential people in South Africa and Barry Ronge described her as a national treasure.

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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