

## SA's *Sex in the City*

*4Play: sex tips for girls* is a locally written and produced e.tv drama series following the lives of four 30-something Johannesburg professional women as they negotiate sex, love and relationships in a contemporary, honest and often funny way. The series has brought together some of South Africa's most talented writers, directors, actors and technicians, mainly women.



Johannesburg-based Curious Pictures has written and produced the series for Johns Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa (JHHESA), an NGO affiliated to the prestigious Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in the US, which has been active in HIV and AIDS programs in South Africa since 1999, funded by USAID PEPFAR.

The series features three directors, including lead director Amanda Lane, as well as colleagues Robyn Aronstam and Catherine Cooke.

### Salon scene

The series is for anyone who loves television that depicts modern-day lifestyles in a hard-hitting, highly entertaining and decidedly adult way. It focuses on the hair and beauty salon of single mother and entrepreneur Noma, and her loquacious girlfriends Nox, Danny and Amira, each of whom has her own unique approach to love, sex and surviving in the city.

The series stars Portia Gumedde as Noma (the hairdresser), Kgomotso Christopher as Nox (the black diamond), Mbali Maphumulo as Amira (the dreamer) and Tiffany Jones as Danny (the outsider). They are brought together at the hair salon, where their lives and relationships are laid bare as the series unfolds.

### Social message

The series represents an excellent opportunity to screen a series that is not only highly entertaining, but also propagates a very serious message about responsible lifestyles among young South Africans.

The choice of thirty-something female characters is deliberate, as South African women aged 19 to 29 are most at risk of contracting HIV. However, they are not the only target audience, it is hoped that men will also be drawn in by the series' saucy nature and in the process learn more responsible behaviours.

It is not the first time that JHHESA and Curious Pictures have collaborated on an entertainment series with a serious underlying message, they also produced TshaTsha, an award-winning SABC1 series for young adults that is currently being screened in Mozambique, as part of that country's efforts to combat HIV/AIDS.

"It is important to try something new with regard to talking to people about HIV and AIDS," says Curious Pictures' Harriet Gavshon, the series' executive producer. "This is a new approach that deals with and celebrates women's sexuality. It is sassy, sexy, glossy and funny. It will make you laugh as much as it will make you cry."

"We looked at the issues and asked ourselves - what hasn't been done - and set out to do it. We brought together an entire team of women writers and directors - and then said, 'Let's have fun, talk about ourselves and push the envelope.' Women are often represented as victims and our series has a fair share of that, but they are also sensual, sexual and active in their own sexual narratives."

## Story making research

According to producer Mariki van der Walt, of Curious Pictures, not only is the show unlike anything South African viewers have seen before, the research was out of the box, too.

"Instead of focus groups, we held pamper parties and brought together groups of women for manicures and pedicures. Then we brought in groups of men for massages and, of course, many personal anecdotes.

Through this process, we were able to create an intimate space for people to tell their stories. These formed the basis of our story making."

## Adult entertainment

JHHESA MD Patrick Coleman, who has more than 30 years of experience in development communication, believes implicitly that entertainment offers great opportunities to spread serious messages but the series is not 'edutainment'. He says the show's titillating nature is intended to draw both female and male viewers and they will be in for a tasteful, adult experience.

"I call it entertainment education, because it's entertainment first," says Coleman. "It's risqué and ribald, without being vulgar. This is a risk-taking series. It's more out there (than other comparable series) and intentionally so."

Director Lane sums up the series succinctly and appropriately, "*4play* is like a perfect handbag: stylish and sexy on the outside, but with a deep and secret centre."

It will be broadcast on e.tv at 9pm on Tuesday nights, from 2 February 2010.