



21 ICONS
SEASON II
SOUTH AFRICA

Adrian Steirn



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargoed until 28 September 2014 at 12h00 (SA)

Johannesburg – 28 September 2014 – James Matthews - “We need to stop thinking about ourselves in an exclusive way – as a Xhosa, or a coloured, or an Indian – and start thinking about ourselves as South Africans.”

On 28 September 2014 at 20h27 on SABC 3, the acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa will feature the ninth icon of its second season: ‘the Dissident Poet’, James Matthews, a political prisoner who was born in District Six and used literature as a vehicle to oppose the Apartheid regime. He has published several collections of poetry, short stories as well as a novel and has won numerous literary awards for his work.

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 Matthews appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster and will be sold at a charity auction next year. The funds raised through the sale will be donated to Matthews’ nominated charity.

The portrait features Matthews as he holds a typewriter – a tool that befits the man who used poetry and the written word as a form of protest.

There was little about Matthews’ childhood to suggest his would become one of the most important voices in South Africa. Leaving school at the age of 14, he took a job selling newspapers – and acquired his first taste of an unjust society. “My classmates used to leave school and go to their nice houses. I would go stand on a corner selling papers, and my money would go into a pot. It was two different lifestyles.”

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Matthews says he wasn’t angered by the situation; however, it did open his eyes to the differences between people – more specifically, that white people weren’t subject to the same treatment and injustices as black people. This observation gave rise to the realisation that words could be a weapon, and Matthews penned his first protest pieces, short stories, before he decided that poetry was a more effective way to reach people.

His words certainly had impact; so much so, in fact, that in 1972 the Apartheid government moved to ban his first book, *Cry Rage* (making it the first collection of poetry to be banned), as well as his second, *Black Voices Shout*. But in adversity lay opportunity: after Matthews’ publishers explained that, while they agreed with what he was saying, they couldn’t afford to represent him, he took matters into his own hands and published them himself. Although Matthews’ protest poetry led to his imprisonment at the hands of the Apartheid government from September to December 1976, he never saw his banning as anything less than a victory against the system.

Matthews’ insistence on creating avenues for those without a voice led to the establishment of his other noteworthy venture: an art gallery for black painters. Just as he was aware of the need to publish work that the





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establishment feared to touch, he maintained that the gallery represented an opportunity to benefit blacks who, at the time, struggled to find chances to exhibit their creations. That said, the gallery came about largely through serendipity. “I knew the guy who owned this building, and I asked if I could use it while he didn’t need it,” he says of finding the venue – a simple request, with lasting impact.

Lasting impact is something Matthews is familiar with: He recounts that, recently, he was walking through Athlone when, seeing him, a stranger shouted the words “Cry Rage”. “That book was written 40 years ago. To think that people still recognise what I wrote – it makes me feel very strong.”

PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

James Matthews, known as the Dissident Poet, talks to photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn about his District Six childhood, establishing his own publishing and art galleries during the Apartheid era, and using words as a weapon.

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.

Season two debuted on Sunday 03 August continuing for another 20 weeks, one of 21 short films will be screened every Sunday on SABC 3 at 20h27.

On each of these Sundays, a poster of the icon’s portrait, taken by Adrian Steirn and his creative team, will be published in the City Press to form a memorable collection that everyone can own. Media partners include SABC 3, City Press (Media 24), Provantage and Mxit.

Social Media:

21 Icons engages with the public through:

Twitter: @21Icons

Website: <http://www.21icons.com>

Mobisite: www.21icons.com

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/21Icons>

Pinterest: <http://www.pinterest.com/21ICONS/>

iTunes App Store: <http://tinyurl.com/lf3cfzm>

Google Play: <http://tinyurl.com/ovtcy45>

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