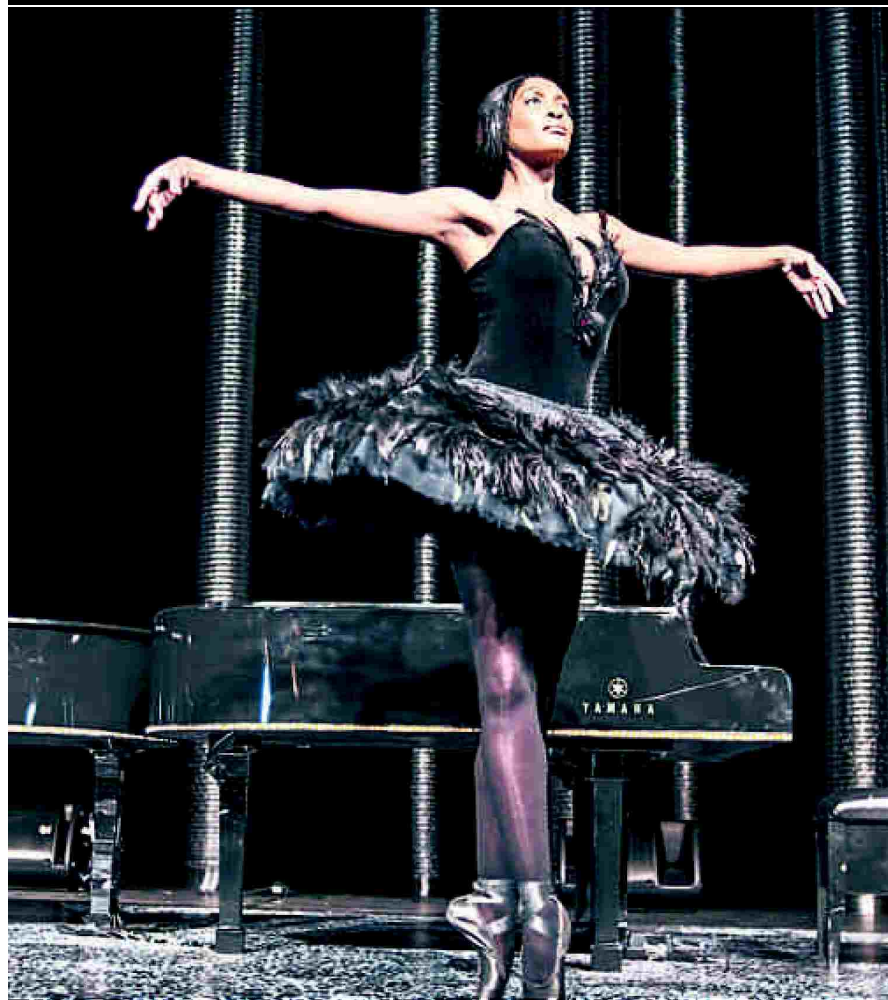


SWAN PRINCESS Ballerina Kitty Phetla performs before an interview with photographer Adrian Steirn in Theatre on the Bay in Camps Bay, Cape Town, for 21 Icons **PHOTO: GARY MAJ WYN**



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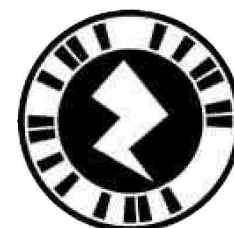
THE BLACK SWAN



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Even in difficult situations, you've got to get up and dust yourself off and say this too shall pass

KITTY PHETLA



This week, 21 Icons brings its eighth icon of its second season into focus: pioneering ballerina, choreographer and model Kitty Phetla.

The portrait features Phetla in a classical dancer's pose, poised at the edge of a lake as if she is about to dance on the water.

It is a salute to Phetla's most famous role as The Dying Swan, which she performed in Amsterdam for former president Nelson Mandela and the Dutch royal family.

Phetla talks about her journey through ballet and how it transformed her from a chubby nine-year-old tomboy in Soweto to the first black ballerina to perform Anna Pavlova's famous solo, The Dying Swan, in 2012, transforming the role and making it her own in the process.

She recalls the day choreographer Martin Schönberg picked her from a crowd of 60 hopeful children, crammed into a hall at Orange Grove Primary School, all eager to begin the metamorphosis into a ballerina.

"We were given a choice of extramurals and I thought I would try ballet, even though it was the first time I had heard the word, because it might be fun, a little outrageous. I still don't know why Martin picked me."

Some people ascribe the fact that he chose her to luck, but Phetla dismisses this notion.

"Success has nothing do with luck. It's about the work you do - not just the hard work, the sweating - but what your mind tells your body."

In Phetla's case, hard work is teamed with discipline - which she believes to be the essence of dance - to create a career that is, beyond doubt, a stellar success.

After training with Schönberg in classical ballet, Spanish dancing, Afro-fusion and contemporary dance, she joined his Ballet Theatre Afrikan.

She won a number of international awards and participated in several competitions.

Then, in 2002, she left to establish Mzansi Productions (now the Joburg Ballet), where she is a principal dancer and choreographer. Phetla also models and hosts a show on Radio 2000.

Of all her triumphs, her performance in The Dying Swan lingers in her mind as the greatest. "It was an amazing experience for me. Traditionally, the dance is performed in a pink tutu, with pink tights and shoes, but it was Martin's idea for me to wear a black tutu and black stockings and shoes because I am black. That was how my Dying Swan was born and to this day, people love it."

She admits dancing for Madiba was nerve-racking, but at the same time, she was able to pretend she was in a bubble and hone her focus, so the experience became a "deliriously happy" one.

You might think it takes passion for a black ballerina to travel from Soweto to Russia, garnering the type of acclaim Phetla has enjoyed. But she maintains passion is simply "the cherry on the top".

"When you have the know-how and the intelligence, and you've been mentored well - when you understand what you are trying to achieve - that's when the passion comes."

She's intent on helping other black children enjoy the same kind of experiences through her work with Joburg Ballet, with which she is actively involved. A number of its youth outreach programmes have found more than 300 promising dancers from "new suburbs".

"Ballet has always been seen as a Western art but we're slowly breaking that stigma. Ballet, all the arts, are for our people, there's a hunger for them in our communities."

● Watch Kitty Phetla tonight on **SABC3 at 8.27pm**

For more information, visit **www.21icons.com**

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