



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
ATTENTION: NEWS/ENTERTAINMENT
DATE: 11 DECEMBER 2013

Gcina Mhlophe – Aiming to catch a Rainbow on the eve of Reconciliation Day

South Africa's best-loved storyteller Gcina Mhlophe ensures that the **21 Icons South Africa** series ends on an infectious and lyrical note on **Sunday December 15**, when SABC3 will screen filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn's short film about the shooting of her portrait at 6.57pm.

Mhlophe has an irrepressible spirit that drives her every day to share Africa's stories, myths, folktales, history and values through the ancient — and, sadly, diminishing — oral tradition of storytelling. As Steirn says, "She's the custodian of stories. That is a huge part of South African culture."

Mhlophe tells the 21 Icons team: "When I wake up in the morning I've got a challenge, I've got a reason to wake up, I've got work to do: to preserve the heritage of my people. I tell stories in order to wake up stories in other people, because I truly believe every living being has got a story to tell."

And, as Steirn says, she has a captivating way of doing it. "When she tells a story, you watch a lady come alive. Her very being is inspired by the stories that she carries with her every day."

Although best known for her storytelling, Mhlophe is also an accomplished author, poet, playwright, director, performer and public speaker. Her works have been translated into German, French, Italian, Swahili and Japanese, and she has spent much of her career travelling and performing across the globe. "I have been telling stories to men and women and children of different races and different cultures all over the world," she says, "and it is an amazing thing. You can connect with people of all races, of all cultures, in whatever language you use, because the

joy that you feel as you tell a story will resonate with them."

Because of the widespread admiration for her contribution to the art of traditional storytelling, many people wrongly assume that Gcina is a shortened version of Gcinamasiko, which means "keeper of heritage". But her full name is Nokugcina, although she has happily taken on Gcinamasiko and even used it for one of her philanthropic endeavours, an arts and heritage trust. It aims to foster a culture of reading and writing in South Africa, especially among children, who are very close to Mhlophe's heart. "I'm the kind who believes that we need to love our children, that we need to nourish and bring them up and show them the way. We need to walk with a sense of dignity on the land of our forefathers so that our children can emulate that," she says.

The trust provides writing and story-creation opportunities and promotes African writers and the heritage of storytelling in schools, with a focus on those that are under-resourced. It exposes youngsters to established writers and storytellers to learn these skills from them, and also encourages reading at schools through the makeover and stocking of their libraries.

Steirn's portrait of Mhlophe reflects his interpretation of a woman who carries her stories with her. He positioned Mhlophe carrying books on her head in a close-up frame, her smile and wide-open eyes telling stories of their own. Among them is a thought for South Africans on the eve of Reconciliation Day on December 16: "We are at a place that is beautiful, but it is a place where we need to regroup and work even harder to make this the beautiful nation. We still need to braid that rope — a long rope, people of different races, different religions, different backgrounds and different skills working together — and throw it as high as we can into the sky and catch the rainbow, bring it back home. Bring it back home."

And, as always, Mhlophe brings it back to storytelling: "You know, one of my favourite authors, Ben Okri,



says: 'A nation is as weak or as powerful as the stories they choose to tell themselves or one another.' I love that. Our story as South Africans is as weak or as powerful as the stories we choose."

The portrait of Mhlophe will be published in the Sunday Times on December 15 and its original, signed version will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to the Gcinamasiko Arts and Heritage Trust.

Public participation is invited on **Twitter: @21icons;**
www.21icons.com and
www.facebook.com/21icons.

21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Nikon and Deloitte and supported by The Department of Arts & Culture as a nation-building initiative.

PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

Photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn is enchanted by storyteller Gcina Mhlophe, who comes alive as an impassioned storyteller of not just history, folktales and myths, but of present-day South Africa.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait of Gcina Mhlophe shows the famed storyteller in close-up frame, smiling broadly at the camera. It conveys her love of the traditional oral narrative, as well as writing and reading, and also reflects her philanthropic work as an ambassador for literacy and preserving an important, ancient art.

ENDS