



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
ATTENTION: NEWS/ENTERTAINMENT
DATE: 12 SEPTEMBER 2013

George Bizos – “South Africa means a lot to me, and I'm very glad that I was able to make a small contribution towards liberty coming to the people in South Africa,” says Bizos. “I have lived through the joys and sorrows of the South African people. That's what really binds you to a country. If you've lived through its joys and sorrows. I've done that.”

On Sunday September 22, International Democracy Day, the **21 Icons South Africa** series of short films and portraits continues to celebrate the country's iconic individuals. This week's icon is one of South Africa's most esteemed advocates and human rights activists, George Bizos, who, in a career spanning more than fifty years, has used the law in an exemplary manner to protect people from the abuse of state power. The short film will be screened on SABC3 at 6.57pm, launched online and the portrait will feature as an exclusive poster that will be published in the Sunday Times newspaper.

George Bizos' most famous client – and close personal friend – has been Nelson Mandela, whom he helped to escape a death sentence on charges of treason during the Rivonia Trial in the early 1960s. In fact, it is said that Bizos made a major contribution to saving Mandela's life by having him add three words to his famous speech from the dock: “if needs be”.

He tells the story to the 21 Icons team: “I said to him, Nelson, you know this business that you're prepared to die was a slogan from the '50s — slogans like ‘the road to freedom passes through jail’ and ‘you must be prepared to die for freedom’. I don't think that the occasion is appropriate to say in an unqualified way that you are prepared to die. You will be accused of challenging the authority; you will be accused of seeking martyrdom. It will be counterproductive. He said: ‘I hear what you're saying, but I must say that I'm prepared to die. I'm not going to take that out.’ So I said, well, let's throw in an alternative. Just put the

words ‘if needs be’ before the words ‘I'm prepared to die’. And he did that.”

Mandela thus said on April 20 1964: “During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal, which I hope to live for and to achieve. But *if needs be*, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

These three words serve as the inspiration for the creative concept behind the powerful portrait of George Bizos taken by photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn, creator of the **21 Icons South Africa** project. Bizos, facing the camera directly, holds a handwritten note containing these three historic words.

“The intention for me with the portrait was to show George Bizos as the dignified man that he is, and holding the three words that changed South Africa's history,” says Steirn. “It's a mesmerizing portrait. The words are direct, the words are clear, and the words are very simple. It's the message of a man who stood for what he believed.”

The original photograph, signed by Bizos, will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to the scholarship and bursary fund of the South African Hellenic Educational and Technical Institute (Saheti), a school in Johannesburg that was founded under Bizos's leadership in 1974. The fund supports pupils of outstanding ability who are in financial need and gives them the opportunity to receive an outstanding education in a modern, multi-ethnic and non-elitist environment. As Bizos says: “I quote Aristotle that education is a jewel at the time of prosperity, and a refuge during difficult times. I think we should follow Aristotle.”

The child of Greek refugees who came to South Africa via Egypt during World War II, Bizos did not attend



school for three years because of his inability to speak English or Afrikaans. After the intervention of a teacher who was infuriated when she saw him working in a shop, he attended school and went on to study law at the University of the Witwatersrand, where he quickly became politicised and was soon known as a “radical leftie”. He attracted the wrath of the apartheid government, who would deny him citizenship – and a passport – for more than 30 years. It is also here that he met Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists, which led to him doing political trials within weeks of being admitted to the bar as an advocate.

“Between 1954 and 1963 I had done innumerable political trials, defending people for breaking their banning orders, women for not taking their passes, women who, together with hundreds, sometimes thousands of others, burnt their passes ... people who refused to comply with regulations as to how they should plow their land, tribesmen who rebelled against their collaborative chiefs,” he says.

Bizos has worked on a several of South Africa’s most defining documents: the Freedom Charter, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution. “After Mandela’s release, he told me: ‘Write a constitution that is not only good for the African National Congress, but for the people of South Africa as a whole.’ And I think we didn’t do a bad job of it,” says Bizos.

He was also involved in the drafting of laws that led to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where he led the team that opposed amnesty applications on behalf of the Biko, Hani, Goniwe and Slovo families, among others. Mandela then appointed him to the Judicial Service Commission, on which he served for 15 years to transform a democratic South Africa’s judiciary.

Viewers and fans of **21 ICONS South Africa** will be able to follow it on **Twitter: @21icons**; view on the website at **www.21icons.com**; or comment at **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

Filmmaker and photographer, Adrian Steirn explores the remarkable journey and wisdom of advocate George Bizos, a staunch defender of human rights whose work in law has left an indelible mark on South Africa.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Photographer Adrian Steirn took the portrait of George Bizos in his office in the Legal Resources Centre in Marshalltown, Johannesburg. The renowned advocate holds a note containing three words “if needs be” – said by Nelson Mandela during the Rivonia Treason Trial – that likely changed the course of South African history.

ENDS

On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

Jo-Leen Jan

Publicity
joleen@honeybell.co.za
SA Mobile: +27 83 287 0165
+27 74 525 9014

Heidi Pretorius

Project Management
heidi@honeybell.co.za
SA Mobile: +27 82 940 3464