



21 ICONS  
SEASON II  
SOUTH AFRICA

*Adrian Steirn*



## MEDIA RELEASE

**Embargoed until 16 November 2014 at 12h00 (SA)**

**Johannesburg – 16 November 2014** – Jill Farrant - “My life has been a series of near death experiences and resuscitations. I’ve had three almost fatal incidents and I’ve been able to, like my plants, resurrect, dry down, resurrect, and dry out again. I think the analogy goes one step further for me in that when you add a drop of water to those plants and they resurrect as for me, you have to add a drop of spirit.”

On 16 November 2014 at 20h27 on SABC 3, the acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa will feature the sixteenth icon of its second season: Jill Farrant, a scientist and professor of molecular and cell biology at the University of Cape Town (UCT) specialising in plant responses to water deficit stress. Described as one of South Africans heroines, she has the ability of ‘Raising the Dead.’

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 Farrant appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster. The beautiful portrait included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. She has nominated a charity of her choice to be the recipient of the funds.

The portrait image features Farrant after being doused with water, a reference to her nickname ‘Queen of Rain’ and pays tribute to her work with drought-tolerant ‘resurrection plants’, which are able to return to life after being denied water for prolonged periods of time.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Farrant talks about her life growing up in a small village in Limpopo and her fascination with outdoor exploration. “It was a time of discovery and being allowed to explore nature.” Today, she is a pioneer in the field of plant molecular and cell biology and has made a global impact with her research into ‘resurrection plants’; extraordinary drought resistant plants that magically ‘come back to life’ from a dried up, death-like state just 24 hours after being given just a mere drop of water.

“Growing up on the farm, I had special places that I went to often, called the flat rocks. I noticed a lifeless plant one day, and then it rained, and two days later when I returned to the river bed, it was very green and alive again. I thought, “There’s something magic happening down by the river.” My encounter was something I wasn’t conscious of at the time, but after I completed my PHD in Medicinal Chemistry from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban I elected to change research fields from investigating the causes of desiccation sensitivity in recalcitrant seeds and instead work on mechanisms of desiccation tolerance in vegetative tissues of resurrection plants. This was spurred when my memory triggered a diary entry I’d made noting my discovery of a seemingly dead plant and watching it return to life after being rehydrated following a heavy rainfall. And then I went and collected the resurrection plants from that farm and that the surrounding area and I began an entire new line of research which I’m still involved in today.”



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An enquiring mind, Farrant is trying to identify and replicate the genes that help these ‘resurrection plants’ defy death. With the goal of providing food security to billions of impoverished people worldwide, she and her team at UCT are learning from nature’s wisdom. Her research has contributed to the understanding of mechanisms used by resurrection plants to tolerate desiccation. This knowledge has been fundamental to identifying characteristics (genes) that might be important for use in bioengineering of crops for improved drought tolerance.

Farrant has an abundance of awards and accolades including the top science award from the Department of Science and Technology. She was also the first women in Life Sciences at UCT to be granted the coveted academic A-rating, which acknowledges academics who are “unequivocally recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field”.

She was the African/Arab States recipient of the 2012 L’Oreal-UNESCO Award for Women in Science, one of only five scientists worldwide who were selected by an international jury as "researchers who will have a major impact on society and help light the way to the future".

The plants that are able to be revived and live again is a mirror to Farrant's personal life that has experienced tumultuous times. Despite enormous academic and professional successes from an early age, Jill has battled with alcoholism, hit rock bottom, stints in rehabilitation and suffered relapse. Somehow, however, Farrant has turned her life around.

With purpose Jill is today more committed to her research and students than ever before and is arguably the most progressive woman in the world of science today.

She tells Steirn how she could live and work anywhere in the world, yet South Africa has captured her soul, and she says that, “There’s something about Africa and South Africa that’s just in my blood. There is something about this place that is me. There’s a heartbeat here and a spirit. It’s a continent wherein humans evolved, really, and its home. I don’t ever want to leave, and I could. I’ve been given job offers to many places, but for me this is home and this is where I want to make the difference.”

Of living in the present she says “We must celebrate our diversity and work with it.”

#### **PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS**

Distinguished scientist Jill Farrant shares with filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn her incredible journey of discovery on a river bed to finding a solution to world problems, like food security, with her resurrection plants.

#### **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.





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**Social Media:**

21 Icons engages with the public through:

Twitter: @21Icons

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

Mobisite: [www.21icons.com](http://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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