



PRESS RELEASE

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John Kani – “Art can be a weapon for change”

On **Sunday November 24, 21 Icons South Africa** pays tribute to the internationally acclaimed actor, playwright and director John Kani, who is widely recognised as the grandfather of South African theatre. His plays “The Island” and “Sizwe Banzi Is Dead”, written in collaboration with fellow actors Winston Ntshona and Athol Fugard, became international hits in the apartheid era and remain relevant and popular productions even now, four decades after they were first performed.

Deeply politicised from a young age, Kani says it was his meeting with Fugard and the Serpent Players theatre group in the 1960s that made him realise he could use his acting skills to fight apartheid — and that white people had a place in that struggle too. “When I got to the rehearsal space the white man I had walked past and didn’t care about came in. He had a long beard and was lighting a pipe and he said: ‘OK, guys, let’s go.’ They were discussing Antigone. And the question was: If the state passes an unjust law, have the people the right to break that law? And I said I’m home. This is where I belong. I could use the stage, I could use art, I could use theater to continue my struggle for liberation. Instead of wanting to pick up the AK47, I could pick up a cultural AK47. Instead of wiping out the white race, I could educate them and teach them about human dignity, respect and equality. That is when I made the decision that I am going to be an actor. I was a political animal looking for an outlet, looking for a platform to continue my struggle for liberation.”

Growing up in New Brighton in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, Kani was instilled with a strong sense of pride in his Xhosa heritage by three grandmothers, the wives of his polygamous grandfather. “I grew up very arrogant,” he tells the 21 Icons team, “very confident and very proud of being an African. I had

absolutely no inferiority complex of any kind. Actually, I had a superiority complex. I was taught I’m the best thing since sliced bread. I’m the best thing since condensed milk.”

And it was this sense of self-worth that he wanted to instill in his fellow blacks through his work with the Serpent Players. “We decided to tell the other story: the story that even though we were born in the township, if you take the dahlias and the lilies and the carnations from the white man’s garden, they will grow — that we are the flowers of the townships. And that was the mandate of the Serpent Players: to tell the story that would motivate the people, that would make them see themselves as human beings, that would give them the power that it is in their hands to liberate themselves.”

Kani was harassed during performances by the security police many times and admits that he deliberately sought to provoke them through his work. He recalls: “If the police stop the play, we knew it was making a difference. If they didn’t, we went back to the drawing board to add more things. It felt it was wrong if it wasn’t banned.”

He once spent 23 days in prison, mostly in solitary confinement, after he had been arrested with Ntshona as the curtain came down after a performance of “Sizwe Banzi Is Dead”. He describes the incident in 21 Icons: “Taking the curtain call, the cop grabbed me, in costume, and pushed me into a car. After about an hour on the road they stopped and pulled the car off to one side and the two of them got out. And I heard the white policeman say: ‘Bring them out, kill them.’ And I thought what a good day to die for what I believe in, for being an artist. For being an artist that represents the truth that is bold enough to tell it like it is.”

Fortunately, it turned out that he had to help move a horse that had been hit by a truck and that the policeman was referring to killing it, not his prisoner.

Filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn, the creator of **21 Icons South Africa**, uses this arrest as



his concept for the portrait of Kani, which will be published in the Sunday Times on November 24. Shot at the Market Theatre, Kani's artistic home where he also founded the Market Theatre Laboratory with Barney Simon, the portrait shows the multi-award-winning artist sitting, his hands cuffed, on his beloved stage. It is a stark reminder of what Kani had to endure in the pursuit of his passion. The original, signed version will be auctioned at the end of the series and the proceeds donated to the John Kani Education Fund which assists Drama students attending The Lab who cannot afford their study fees. A short film about the making of the portrait will also be screened on SABC3 at 6.57pm on the same day.

Today, The Lab, as it is affectionately known, continues to operate as an agent of social change, through various outreach and community training programmes and festivals. It stands as testimony to Kani's determination to use culture as a weapon of change. He doesn't believe in destiny being foisted on a person, he says, he believes one makes one's own destiny. And he has no regrets. "I'm grateful for the experience I've had, for having been part of the struggle. My memories are beautiful. Sometimes they haunt me, but I've learnt to be selective about my memories. There are things I put away, very far away, but I never throw them away. Because when I need them, I can go get them. Now I use them as an actor."

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 joins the multi-award-winning actor, director and playwright John Kani at the Market Theatre in downtown Johannesburg, where they talk about his lifelong work

in theatre and how it was shaped by the struggle against apartheid.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Taken on stage at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait of John Kani shows the actor sitting on stage, his hands cuffed, contemplating the lessons he has learnt during a life spent in theatre, telling stories with a powerful message.

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