



21 ICONS SEASON THREE (A FUTURE OF A NATION) FEATURES KOPANO MATLWA MABASO

Kopano Matlwa Mabaso – “I love writing. I write because I need to, because it sustains and energises me. Writing allows me to do everything else that I do.”

On 24 January 2016 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 18th icon of its third season: Kopano Matlwa Mabaso. The episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

The 30-year-old is a South African medical doctor pursuing a PhD in public health at the University of Oxford. She is also the author of the critically acclaimed novels *Coconut* and *Spilt Milk*.

21 ICONS traces South Africa’s history over the course of its three seasons, moving from the fight for freedom to the country’s growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future. This season has been envisaged as a tribute to the country’s future, shedding the spotlight on young South African icons.

For this reason, young South African talent Gary van Wyk (34) has stepped up as principal photographer for the third season. Adrian Steirn, who conceived the project, continues his involvement as one of the photographers capturing the behind-the-scenes images.

Matlwa Mabaso has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III as a voice for the new generation of South Africans dealing with issues such as race, poverty and gender and coming to grips with their sense of identity. She is also acknowledged for making healthcare more equally accessible and for establishing educational support programmes.

On her selection as an icon she comments, “My discomfort provoked me to write. Growing up in post-apartheid South Africa as a black, young South African, I was grappling with my sense of identity in a very complicated country. So I wrote about this discomfort.”

A University of Cape Town (UCT) and Rhodes scholar, she holds an MBChB from UCT and an MSc in Global Health Science from the University of Oxford.

She says, “I could never choose between medicine and writing. Anton Chekhov said, ‘Medicine is my wife, and writing my mistress,’ and that makes complete sense to me. I love them both.”

Matlwa Mabaso co-founded Waiting Room Education by Medical Students, a health promotion organisation educating patients and their families on common health conditions in the waiting rooms of mobile clinics.

“As a doctor you have the unique privilege of listening to people’s stories. They tell you things they would never tell anyone else. I care deeply about people’s stories so for me, medicine and writing make sense together,” she adds.

Pretoria-born Matlwa Mabaso was just nine-years-old when South Africa birthed its democracy in 1994. In her debut novel, *Coconut*, published in 2006, she writes about her experience growing up as a young black girl in the new South Africa and the complexities associated with finding a sense of belonging.

Labelled a “Coconut”, a South African stereotype regarded a slur, she tells Van Wyk how the novel unpacks what it means to be young, black and beautiful in the new South Africa, where fitting in can be at the cost of one’s own identity.

“I write about things that I find difficult. *Coconut* began when I was in high school, trying to figure out my own identity and often what was considered to be good was everything white and the challenge of finding a place and meaning as a black young South African. *Spilt Milk* came from grappling with the South Africa that I live in – I write about what bugs me,” she says.



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However, she believes that the commonalities between individuals far outweigh the differences; “We are all more similar than we think we are. People struggle with identity all over the world, which is one of the things we have in common.”

Coconut earned Matlwa Mabaso the 2007 European Literary Award – of which she was the youngest ever recipient – and the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa, considered by some to be the African equivalent of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

She released her second novel, *Spilt Milk*, published in 2010, which touches on South Africa’s nation-building journey and building social unity through active citizenry; “To be South African is to inherit a painful but courageous history. South Africans are always looking at how we can do things better and I love being a part of that.”

In 2012, she founded the Transitions Foundation, an organisation that attempts to improve the performance of young South Africans across the gamut of educational needs.

When asked about her thoughts on the recent events surrounding #FeesMustFall she enthuses, “I can’t remember the last time I was as excited about South Africa as when I watched those young South Africans who took to the streets to demand free education. It’s the South Africa that we’ve always been and it’s great to see that South Africa back again.”

For the portrait ‘*Imagined Reality*’ which will appear digitally on the Monday after her short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, “Using various props, a colourful ‘wonderland’ is constructed that echoes Matlwa Mabaso’s love for discovering characters, health solutions, and deconstructing embedded cultural ideas, like ‘coconut’ and ‘the rainbow nation’. Seated among multiple palm tree leaves wearing a rainbow charm necklace – a severed coconut to her left and milk spilling to her right – she is imagined as the conjurer of a fantasy world that breaks boundaries through creativity.”

On the future of South Africa she says, “I am very optimistic about our rainbow nation. Maybe it needs to be re-examined and re-imagined but there’s a sense that it is ours. Young people are going to lead and it’s such an exciting time.”

She concludes, “I think it’s a misnomer that we go abroad to learn and come back. As South Africans, we have so much to teach the world, and our continent has so much to contribute. This is the place people will be looking toward in the future.”

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PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

A doctor, an author, and a mother, Kopano Matlwa Mabaso has accomplished an enormous amount at a young age. Here she sits down with photographer Gary Van Wyk to talk about her love for the written word, her passion for affecting social change as a doctor and how expression through writing sustains her.

ABOUT 21 ICONS SEASON III

By making accessible the personal stories of young individuals whose lives are catalysts for positive change, the purpose of the project is to show the way forward for a new generation to aspire to be socially conscious and active citizens. 21 ICONS has built a truly unique platform for connecting and imparting key attributes of the lives of the people it features who transform societal norms for the better. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Gary Van Wyk 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.



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Behind each portrait lies a carefully planned concept that captures not only the essence of each icon visually, but also in spirit and in terms of their unique legacy.

The narrative storyboard incorporates the icons' descriptions of the people and social advances that have created opportunities for them. By sharing their personal stories and what they have done with their freedom, the short-films communicate these stories to inspire the next generation to follow in their footsteps and move forward collectively as a new democracy.

Following the broadcast on Sunday evenings, the icons' portraits, taken by Van Wyk, will be published online and on digital platforms immediately available for individuals to engage and interact with these 21 remarkable new South African icons.

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Season three debuted on Sunday 6 September 2015 and broadcasts for a further 20 weeks, with a short film screened every Sunday on SABC 3 at 19h27.

This is an exciting opportunity for South Africans to engage with, and among, themselves to drive nation building and cohesion in a way that redefines the South African identity.

Season three of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa.

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