



21 ICONS
SEASON II
SOUTH AFRICA

Adrian Steirn



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargoed until 7 December 2014 at 12h00 (SA)

Johannesburg – 7 December 2014 – Miriam Tlali: “A good book by itself, if it has the right messages in it, can change a person; his outlook, his persona, it can change a human being into something he never thought he could be. It can reinvent a person. That’s what a good book can do and it doesn’t come through the efforts of other people, it comes from inside you.”

On 7 December 2014 at 20h27 on SABC 3, the acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa will feature the nineteenth icon of its second season: Miriam Tlali, the first black woman in South Africa to publish a novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan*, a semi-autobiographical work, as well as the author of the critically acclaimed *Amandla*.

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 Tlali 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.

It features a famous quote lifted from her literary work and inscribed across glass. The portrait is shot through the glass, the letters obscuring to a degree which is symbolic of the subjective interpretation of words, including literary expression and production, through the looking glass of oneself.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Tlali talks about her life as the first black South African female author. Born in Doornfontein in Johannesburg she experienced her childhood in Sophiatown, that legendary community within Johannesburg which was razed because it was the sole area where Africans were permitted to take permanent title to land.

With a passion for reading from a young age she attributes this to her educators. “We had very good teachers, these people had been the first royal readers. They had learnt teaching under the United Peoples’ Party and they all spoke English really well.”

Matriculating at the young age of 15, Tlali’s teachers were always in awe of her stories and on the side she used to write their personal and business letters. Wanting to study literature at the University of the Witwatersrand, this was not an option due to the reservation of positions for white students.

With her hands full of the Thackeray and Dickens classics, she later attended the Pius XII Catholic University (now the University of Lesotho). Unable to continue her studies due to financial constraints she found a job as a bookkeeper at a furniture store.



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Feeling demotivated and despondent at this job she felt she was employed by people who ‘were busy stalking Africans’, she left her position to be a stay at home mother and look after her ailing mother-in-law. During this time she penned her first novel and in 1969, Tlali had written and completed *Muriel at Metropolitan*, a semi-autobiographical work. “I was surprised that I was the first black woman to write a book. I took it for granted that there must be someone else who had authored literature, only to find out that when I had finished writing and submitting it to the publisher, that I was in fact the first African woman in South Africa to write and publish a book.”

The novel was only published six years later in 1975 and in 1979, the book was banned by the Apartheid government; however, it was published internationally under the title *Between Two Worlds* by Longman African Classics. The government censored her work and cut out certain chapters, certain phrases, certain sentences. “A few months after the books were published, I was in Lesotho at the time, I tried to stay away from South Africa because I was ashamed of this book, the way they had cut it, and I didn’t like it.”

Tlali remembers women from the Jewish Organisation selling her book and she felt really proud. She chuckles as she remembers one woman asking her if she really wrote it. “I said yes, and she said ‘No, some white man must have written it for you.’” She laughed it off as she says, “They assumed that as Africans we were inferior human beings and we were incapable of doing things such as writing novels.”

Based on the 1976 Soweto Uprising, Tlali published her second novel *Amandla* (meaning Power) in 1980. This novel was very different from her first and displayed no tolerance, rather, it took a strongly committed and activist stand. Banned only weeks after it was published, it was translated into several languages including Japanese, Polish, German and Dutch.

In 1984 she wrote a collection of short stories titled *Mihloti* (meaning tears) and in 1989, *Footprints in the Quag* was published.

Tlali reveals that when came back from London she knew she had to compile *Amandla*. “I feared no political opponent at the time and was already being pursued by the Boers. It was difficult for me to write because they could come at any time, and they would come in the night and search the house.” They would take her material and question why her writing was in English and not her native language. During these times she toured England and visited the homes of ancient writers, the classics that she used to devour, and she realised that she had to document everything.

As an author, Tlali has travelled the world and represented South Africa in several countries. In 1978 she was invited to an international writing programme at Iowa State University in the United States of America. Between 1989 and 1990, Tlali was a visiting scholar at the Southern African Research Program at Yale University.

For her contribution to the literary profession, Tlali has received many accolades, including being honoured by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology for being the first black woman to publish a novel. In 1995, the bureau also honoured her with a Literary Lifetime Achievement Award and in 2008, she received the Presidential Award, the Order of Ikhamanga (silver).

Tlali founded the publishing house Skotaville. As a member of the Women's National Coalition, Tlali assisted in drafting the preamble to the South African Women's Charter.

In 2013, Tlali celebrated her 80th birthday. She is reported to be writing her autobiography.





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PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

Miriam Tlali shares her lifestory with Steirn about being the first black female author who was denied education at the university of her choice due to racial predispositions, her love of the classics, Thackeray and Dickens, and the incredible power of storytelling in unveiling the truth.

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.

Social Media:

21 Icons engages with the public through:

Twitter: @21Icons

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

Mobisite: 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>

On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

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