

# Fashion. Travel . Events. Lifestyle.

Nontando Mposo

## Charting the emotional quest of a photographer

Posted on [September 25, 2015](#)



— Activist Jes Foord with Gary van Wyk

Cape Town photographer Gary van Wyk was 18 when he took his first memorable photograph – of a Caribbean sunset.

“It just happened to be this amazing sunset. I witnessed a photographer setting up his camera and tripod to take a picture and I took a picture myself. When I looked at that photograph at home, I went ‘wow!’ There was just this connection... it was like zooming into the sunset as if it was in front of me again. I liked the idea of being able to represent something like that,” Van Wyk recalls.

That was during a two-year gap period which Van Wyk spent travelling after completing matric at Plumstead High School.

“When I finished school I was 17 years old and I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I went to London after hearing great stories about it from a friend’s sister who had visited there. I was the first person in my family to leave the country... I literally left with a few hundred pounds. That move changed my life,” he says.

After taking that photograph, Van Wyk saved up for a Minolta camera and started taking pictures.

***“I decided then that I wanted to go back to South Africa and study photography. Nobody in my family was a photographer or doing anything artistic... I had no idea what photography was,” says Van Wyk,***

who was raised in Belhar and Lansdowne.

Returning to Cape Town, he started studying photography at Peninsula Technikon, now the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in 2001, and was headhunted by Independent Newspapers during his second year.

“I started my internship at the Cape Argus in 2003. I was supposed to be there for only two days but I stayed for five years. When Cape Town photographer George Hallett introduced us to documentary photography, I jumped at it... it just made sense to me,” he says.

***“It was the best training and experience I could have asked for. I learnt how to shoot under pressure. It was the best way of learning... the best thing that ever happened to me.”***

After leaving Independent Newspapers for another company, Van Wyk was approached by photographer and filmmaker Adrian Steirn to join the production team of the socio cultural multimedia project 21 ICONS, which was working on its first season.

Launched in South Africa in 2013, 21 ICONS is the brainchild of Steirn, who is known for his black and white portraits of some of the nation’s most notable individuals such as Nelson Mandela and Nadine Gordimer.

The series, which is produced by the Ginkgo Agency, celebrates the lives of extraordinary South Africans who have been catalysts in shaping the nation’s global landscape in politics, the environment, athletics, sports and the arts.

That was in 2013. Now in its third year (and third season), Van Wyk, 34, has taken over from Steirn and stepped up as principal photographer while Steirn captures the behind-the-scenes images.



— Visual artist Athi-Patra Ruga photographed by Gary

**“Working with the people from the first two seasons was an incredible privilege. It meant having the chance to be a part of South Africa’s history. Now in Season 3 we are getting to meet emerging South Africans. These are our country’s new leaders and change makers, and working**

**with them, taking their portraits is an extraordinary opportunity,” says Van Wyk.**

The short-film series will launch its new season on Sunday on SABC 3, and will feature 21 youth icons, the next generation of South African leaders and influencers. The season will also see a move from black and white portraits to colour photography.

The season's first five icons include performance artist Athi-Patra Ruga, rape survivor and gender activist Jes Foord, community activist and co-founder of the Kliptown Youth Programme Thulani Madondo, paralympic wheelchair tennis player Lucas Sithole, conservationist and eco-preneur Catherine Constantinides, and textile and knitwear designer Laduma Ngxokolo.

**“Black and white photography deals with the past, it deals with memory and is very nostalgic. Season 3 is about the people making a difference now, who are under the age of 35 and up-and-coming South Africans. Colour just makes sense moving forward... showing the rainbow nation for what it is now,” Van Wyk explains.**

“Colour is literally what life is in the now, it describes more than what black and white images could. Also it gives a new energy to the project,” he says.

“Behind each portrait lies a carefully planned concept that captures not only the essence of each icon visually but also their spirit. Each portrait pays tribute to the unique path carved by each icon,” Van Wyk explains during our meeting at the Ginkgo Agency office in De Waterkant where a few of his portraits are displayed on the wall.

“It's a very interesting way of doing it. There are many ways of doing cool portraits with cool lighting and angles, but it's not enough to tell a story so that even a child can look at the portrait and ask, ‘Why is that woman standing next to that shadow?’ Or for an adult to be able to look at it and say, ‘I remember that moment’.

**“Each portrait has to tell a story. We had to take into consideration everything, including the location and lighting. There is a lot of pre-planning and production involved and it can be tricky. When you watch the films you will realise why the portraits are like that, that makes it even more powerful,” he says.**

Working for Ginkgo means Van Wyk travels a lot, photographing a variety of things – from the world's biggest tiger in Nepal to capturing the Amazon rain forest.

“I get to meet all these famous people and it’s amazing and a privilege, but for me photographing everyday people is the most amazing thing. The most powerful shots for me are spontaneous, raw moments. I live life and photograph the experiences that I have in life.

“A lot of people say that when you take photographs you are missing the moment but for me it heightens the moment. Normally if you are looking at things, you are passing by. But because I photograph things I look at things so much more intensely... I look at the colours and the light.

“I find that I pay much more attention to things since I started photography. The way I look at the world is completely different, everything fascinates me.”

Van Wyk’s girlfriend Caron Gie, who is a teacher, and the works of great photographers are among his biggest inspirations.

“My studies taught me the technical side of things, but technical ability doesn’t teach you photography, photography is a way of life. Everyone observes things differently and if you are able to photograph the way you see things, you are able to photograph the world. You need the technical ability to interpret what you see,” he says.

“You can’t become a better photographer with a better lens or camera. You become better by being more in touch with your emotional state, the way you observe things – deeper and deeper, that makes you a better photographer.”

And what makes a good photograph? “A good photograph strikes an emotion in someone. Even if you can’t explain why, but it does. It has to do with what you see and how you interpret it,” he says.

Van Wyk’s tips for budding photographers include studying the works of great photographers and as taking as many pictures as you can.

“Work hard, that is the only reason I am where I am today. “I don’t think that I have any special skills or ability, I’ve literally shot every day from the time I started and it’s the only way I learnt. I carry a camera every day, everywhere I go and I photograph anything and everything.

**“There are many reasons I take pictures. I love the art of photography. There is that magic that you can freeze time. Being a photographer gets me out of the house, it gives me purpose in life and it gives me an excuse to stare at things. It gives me an excuse to be inquisitive.**

**“It also gives me an opportunity to explore the world and exploring is the biggest reason that I do photography,” he adds.**

●21 ICONS (season 3) debuts on SABC 3 on Sunday, September 6, and will run for a further 20 weeks.

**This feature first appeared in the Cape Argus on the 1st of September 2015.**

---

**SHARE THIS:**



3 bloggers like this.

This entry was posted in [Uncategorized](#) and tagged [21 ICONS](#), [Africa](#), [Art](#), [artist](#), [artists](#), [Athi-Patra Ruga](#), [Cape Argus](#), [Cape Town](#), [Gary van Wyk](#), [photographers](#), [South Africa](#), [TV Series](#) by [Nontando Mposo](#). Bookmark the [permalink \[https://nontando58mposo.wordpress.com/2015/09/25/charting-the-emotional-quest-of-a-photographer/\]](https://nontando58mposo.wordpress.com/2015/09/25/charting-the-emotional-quest-of-a-photographer/) .