



PRESS RELEASE

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21 Icons Presents A Poignant Tribute To Professor Emeritus Phillip Vallentine Tobias

On Sunday **November 10** at 6.57pm on SABC3, the **21 Icons South Africa** project features perhaps its most poignant episode when it pays tribute to the late paleoanthropologist Phillip Tobias, who has passed away since the short film was made. Tobias, South Africa's first geneticist and also its most decorated scientist of the 20th century, died in June last year at the age of 86.

Those who knew Tobias will confirm that his scientific stature was matched by his love of people. In his career at the University of the Witwatersrand spanning more than 50 years, he tells filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn, he taught and mentored about 10 000 students — and he loved them, as he did his colleagues. “Except I must admit there were just a few cases where one had to grit one’s teeth and force oneself to love them,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. The prolific professor also rather made a “pig of himself” penning more than 1 200 articles and books. “I still — this may shock you — but I still use an electric typewriter and most of my big books have been written in that way,” he says.

At the time of the interview, which was filmed at his office at Wits, where he was professor emeritus in anatomy and human biology, Tobias was working on a second memoir to complement “Into the Past”, published in 2005. Charles Darwin kept interfering, though. “Darwin kept me so busy — there were symposia, there were meetings, there were talks, we had a cocktail party at Wits University for his birthday. I had the pleasure and privilege of proposing a toast, but I’ve never proposed a toast to a man 200 years old, which he would’ve been if he were still around. So, allowing for things like that and in the constant flow of invitations, etcetera, I am having a hell of a difficult job in finding my way back to the second

volume of the memoirs,” he laughs — and promptly toasts Darwin with a “cheers” once more.

Sadly, the memoir never saw the light, although Wits University Press has just launched an updated memorial edition of the book featuring some of the unfinished material as well as a new introduction.

A three-time Nobel Prize nominee and a member of the Royal Society of both London and South Africa, Tobias has received honorary doctorates, awards, medals and accolades from almost every corner of the scientific world. But he was also a passionate activist against apartheid, especially in academe. “I was involved, from the very beginning, in the anti-apartheid struggle,” he tells the 21 Icons team. “But whereas many others did that from the comfort and safety of New York or London or Amsterdam or Paris, I was one of those who chose to stay on in South Africa and to fight against apartheid from within the country.”

“When I was a student I was very active in student affairs and became president of the National Union of South African Students, NUSAS, and at that point the nationalist government of South Africa came to power on a platform of imposing apartheid on all branches of society, and that included compulsory segregation in the schools and universities. And I realised the vigour of their intention to interfere with our freedom, and for 40 years I kept up my stand in this regard. Even on the senate of the University of Witwatersrand I was known as its conscience, and this was because of my leaping into action whenever any new bit of legislation was threatened, whenever any kind of restriction and restraint based on racial grounds was imposed upon us.”

“Happily, I lived long enough to see and experience change. I was happy that I had lived long enough to see that transition. But there were many gloomy days, almost suicidal days, which one had to contend with.”

For Tobias’ portrait, which will be published in the Sunday Times newspaper on November 10, Steirn



wanted to hark back to the professor's days doing fieldwork. About this part of his work, Tobias says: "You need to get out, driven by the thrill of discovery, but you also need to have the patience to get down and study."

Steirn's portrait of Tobias shows the professor holding a lantern in one hand and a walking stick in the other as he grins into the camera. Says Steirn: "Phillip Tobias has a wonderful sense of humour. And when you look at the portrait he has a huge smile on his face — he enjoyed the experience just as much as we did."

Indeed, when Steirn, after taking the portrait, jokingly calls Tobias a model in addition to being an archaeologist and doctor, he responds drily: "Well, I did put my teeth in today."

The remarkable portrait, signed by Tobias, will be auctioned at the end of the **21 Icons South Africa** series and the proceeds donated to a charity he designated.

For the thousands of admirers of Phillip Vallentine Tobias (1925-2012), this episode of **21 Icons South Africa** will be a moving reminder of the man who enhanced the world's understanding of the evolution of humankind and put South Africa on the paleoanthropology map with his study of hominid fossil sites.

But as Tobias says in 21 Icons: "One's legacy will live on. Even when my rather croaky voice is not still there to convey the message, the papers I've written, the chapters in books, the books themselves will speak for me after I've gone."

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

In an interview filmed two years before his death in 2012, filmmaker Adrian Steirn explores the fascination with learning, wicked sense of humour and love of people that constituted the world of paleoanthropologist Phillip Tobias, South Africa's most decorated scientist of the 20th century.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait shows the late paleoanthropologist Phillip Tobias grinning at the camera as he holds an old-fashioned hurricane lamp and his walking stick. It refers to his days doing fieldwork and uncovering the mysteries of human evolution – a real-life Indiana Jones.

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