



21 ICONS SEASON THREE (A FUTURE OF A NATION) FEATURES SIYABULELA (SIYA) XUZA

Siya Xuza – *“I am passionate about innovation and I am passionate about Africa, but more importantly I am passionate about the potential of young people.”*

On 7 February 2016 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 20th icon of its third season: 26-year-old South African energy entrepreneur and industrialist, Siya Xuza. His company, Galactic Energy Ventures, is at the forefront of the development of sustainable models for energy storage. The 21 ICONS episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

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.

Xuza has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III to demonstrate that through hard work and dedication individuals can overcome barriers and adversity and strive to be the best possible version of themselves.

On his selection as an icon Xuza comments, “I am an example of what happens when you give young South Africans opportunities. When you follow your passion, shut out noise that can distract you and you are true to yourself, you achieve greatness.”

Xuza rose to prominence in his field of interest, renewable energy development, with unshakeable perseverance and the belief that greatness can be achieved if one applies oneself regardless of their circumstances; “I always want people to see me as a person who kept failing and failing and eventually succeeded, because that’s the true story of my success. It didn’t come over night.”

A born innovator, Xuza grew up in a small township, North Crest in Mthata, Eastern Cape. He says, “I’m proud of Mthatha, I’m proud of where I’m from. It’s part of my identity and it’s a reflection of the talent in South Africa, which does not lie in typical places. There’s talent everywhere.”

Born nearby to the village of Nelson Mandela, Xuza also had the honour of serving Madiba as his praise singer and the privilege of a close connect and association with the icon and his family.

He was a curious child and began experimenting with alternative fuels in his mother’s kitchen at the age five. Inspired by an aeroplane flying overhead during the 1994 elections the sighting rendered him determined to create one of his own. But he realised that he would first need fuel to launch the aircraft into space.

“We procrastinate so much and we often forget that it’s often the smallest starts in life that make a big difference. I did not have the laboratory and I did not have NASA facilities, those only came later. I simply had my mom’s kitchen and I started there,” he muses.

“I don’t blame my lack of resources. I don’t blame not having laboratories, all these exciting things. But I saw that as an opportunity to use the limited resources,” he adds.

He recalls experimenting with utensils in his mother’s kitchen to bake rocket fuel ‘like cookies’ and was often reprimanded for starting fires; “I didn’t know what science was. However, I knew I wanted to make things and to build things. I was a kid going into kitchens behind my mom’s back, mixing things together, blowing up kitchens and getting a hiding in the meantime,” he quips.

This exploration would culminate in a science project during high school that would later develop into a cheaper and safer rocket fuel.



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“I don’t see myself as a scientist per se but I see myself as someone who is creative and science is an outlet to express that creativity,” he explains.

His high school research sought to harness solar technologies to generate clean affordable energy and saw him globally lauded at numerous international science fairs. His work as an energy-engineer won him a scholarship to Harvard University in the United States and was so remarkable that Nasa-affiliated Lincoln Laboratory named a minor planet after him. This is an insurmountable accomplishment that few could ever imagine.

He notes that through education and opportunity he was able to change his life; “Education is freedom. Education transformed my life. For me education was critical, not just formal school education but teaching myself. University didn’t teach me to invent, I taught myself that, and I think it is something we should encourage more.”

He continues, “I am using [my freedom] to be an ambassador of possibility. Using my talent to the best of my abilities.” He further adds that South Africans can’t afford to become complacent, as we still have a lot more to do.

“So many young people today will play the victim game. We are not victims, we are conquerors. And the way to conquer is [not to] say I’m a victim of this therefore I will not get anything, [rather] say because I’m a victim, because I find myself in this situation in life, I’m going to work harder than the people who have access to resources that I don’t,” he states.

Xuza established Galactic Energy Ventures to find solutions that would address the energy crisis in South Africa and the continent. Using engineering and science his research is geared towards using fuel cells as a means of storing energy; “I became interested in finding solutions to meet one of Africa’s biggest challenges, which is energy. That’s when I shifted my attention towards fuel cells.”

In an intimate conversation with Van Wyk he talks about his entrepreneurial spirit and the need to foster talent; “I think entrepreneurs come in all forms, but I think that entrepreneurship is essentially having the vision to see something, the vision to identify an opportunity that nobody else is thinking of, or the ability to see something and to find better ways to do it.”

For the portrait ‘*Within Reach*’, which will appear digitally on the Monday after his short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, “At Cape Town Science Centre in Woodstock, Xuza is photographed inside their planetarium. His face visible through a constellation of stars, the portrait speaks to his early explorations of science and the minor planet – 23182 Siyaxuza – named in his honour, and is a tribute to his assertion that it is in reaching for the stars that we will ultimately achieve greatness.”

On the future of South Africa she says, “What I see in the future is a South Africa becoming a global leader in innovation. As South Africa where we are coming up with our own brands and our own products, that for me is the next narrative.”

He concludes by saying, “I could be anywhere with the skill that I have, with the education that I have. I could be anywhere but I’m so glad I’m in South Africa.”

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PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

As a young boy in Mthatha, Xuza would concoct versions of ‘rocket-fuel’ in his mother’s kitchen – today he is one of South Africa’s most respected engineers. He talks to Gary Van Wyk about those early science experiments, his passion for innovation, and why the onus is on each and every one of us to contribute to Africa’s development.

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



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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.

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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