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## 21 ICONS SEASON II FEATURING EIGHTH ICON KITTY PHETLA



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**“Even in difficult situations, you’ve got to get up and dust yourself off and say this too shall pass.”**

On **21 September 2014 at 20h27 on SABC 3**, the acclaimed series **21 ICONS South Africa** will feature the **eighth icon** of its second season: **award-winning ballerina, choreographer and model Kitty Phetla**.

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. [Click here](#) to watch the 21 ICONS promo video.

emerged from the townships and become one of South Africa's illustrious ballerinas. She became part of this project because her story illustrates the potential for development of a ballet culture within South Africa. To understand the journey she's taken to become 'The Black Swan' is an inspiring story about discipline and perseverance and what can be achieved through independent thought and focus."

Steirn's portrait of Phetla appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster and will be sold at a charity auction next year. The funds raised through the sale will be donated to Phetla's nominated charity.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Phetla talks about her journey through ballet, and how it transformed her from a chubby nine-year-old tomboy in Soweto to the first black ballerina to perform Anna Pavlova's famous solo The Dying Swan in 2012, transforming the role and making it her own in the process.

Phetla recalls the day that choreographer Martin Schonberg picked her from a crowd of 60 hopeful children, crammed into a hall at Orange Grove Primary School, all eager to begin the metamorphosis to become a ballerina.



Some people ascribe the fact that he did to luck – but Phetla dismisses this notion. "Success has nothing do with luck. It's about the work that you do – not just the hard work, the sweating - but what your mind tells your body."

In Phetla's case, hard work is teamed with discipline – which she believes to be the essence of dance – to create a career that is, beyond doubt, a stellar success. After training with Schonberg in classical ballet, Spanish dancing, Afro-fusion and contemporary dance, she joined his Ballet Theatre Afrikan. She won a number of international awards and participated in several competitions, then in 2002 left to establish Mzansi Productions (now the Joburg Ballet), where she is a principal dancer and choreographer. Phetla also models, and has a radio show on Radio 2000.

Of all her triumphs, however, her performance of The Dying Swan lingers in her mind as the greatest. "It was an amazing experience for me. Traditionally, the dance is performed in a pink tutu with pink tights and shoes, but it was Martin's idea for me to wear a black tutu and black stockings and shoes, because I am black. That was how my Dying Swan was born, and to this day, people love it." Dancing for fellow icon Madiba was nerve-wracking, she admits, but at the same time, she was able pretend that she was in a bubble and hone her focus, so that the experience became a "deliriously happy" one.

You might think that it takes passion for a black ballerina to travel from Soweto to Russia, garnering the type of acclaim that Phetla has enjoyed, but she maintains that passion is simply "the cherry on top". "When you have the know-how and the intelligence, and you have been mentored well – when you understand what you are trying to achieve - that's when the passion comes."

She's intent on helping other black children enjoy the same kind of experiences through her work with Joburg Ballet of which Phetla is actively involved in a number of youth outreach programmes reaching over 300 promising dancers from 'new suburbs', "Ballet has always been seen as a westernized art, but we're slowly breaking that stigma. Ballet, and the arts, are for our people, and there's a hunger for them in our communities."

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