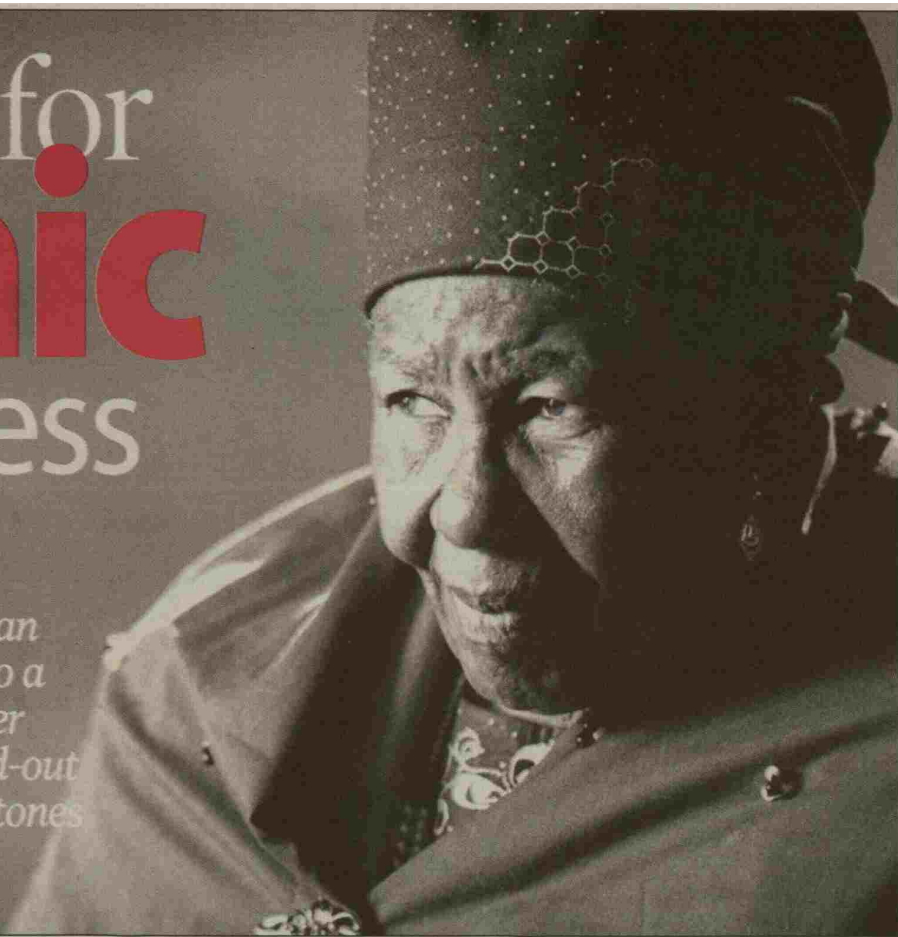


# An eye for iconic greatness

*21 Icons continues to make an impact, and that is thanks to a combination of its filmmaker Adrian Steirn, and his stand-out SA subjects, writes Lesley Stones*



Grace Masuku - catch the piece being flighted tonight on SABC3

An outsider with fresh eyes can often see the greatness of a country when its own people have grown inured to it.

Perhaps that's why it took Australian filmmaker Adrian Steirn to highlight a new generation of extraordinary people.

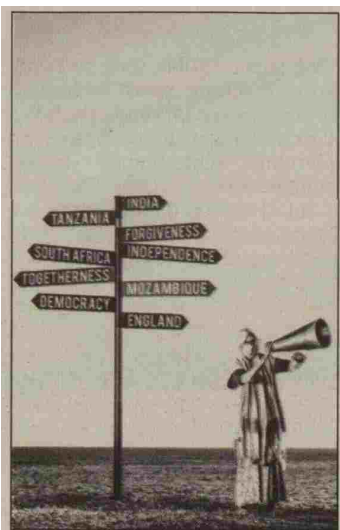
Steirn is the photographer and director behind *21 Icons*, a series of portraits and short films featuring current heroes and heroines making an impact and excelling in a variety of fields.

"The narrative of South Africa is built around just one person, Nelson Mandela, which was a very dangerous thing to do when he was old, human and very mortal," Steirn says. "The whole community was based just around his life, and we wanted to show that South Africa was a really sustainable, robust community. It's a pleasure to show the rest of the world the extraordinary things coming from this continent."

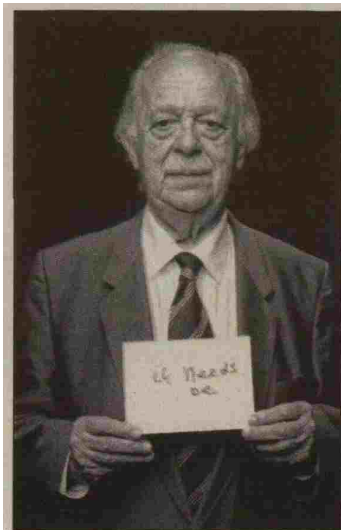
Documenting the original *21 Icons* was a no-brainer, with Mandela, Desmond Tutu, FW de Klerk, Ahmed Kathrada, George Bizos and other memorable names well worth commemorating. Now Steirn is creating a second season, and while the names are less familiar, he believes they are no less worthy of admiration.

Although he has lived in South Africa for seven years, his "outsider's eye" gives him greater clarity. "There's a slight objectivity in coming to a community later in life, when you are not born there and take things for granted. I was literally blown away with the human spirit I met in South Africa. The expats make it sound very dangerous, but it's one of the most beautiful communities I have ever experienced and we wanted to highlight that."

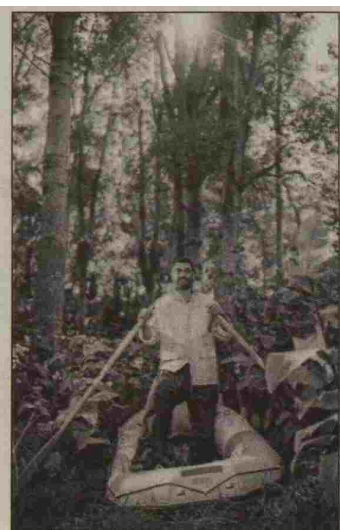
The *21 Icons* project taps into this inner spirit, he says. The second series includes Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs; Black Like Me founder Herman Mashaba; rugby hero Francois Pienaar; Frene Ginwala, the first female speaker in the National Assembly and Imtiaz Sooliman, founder of



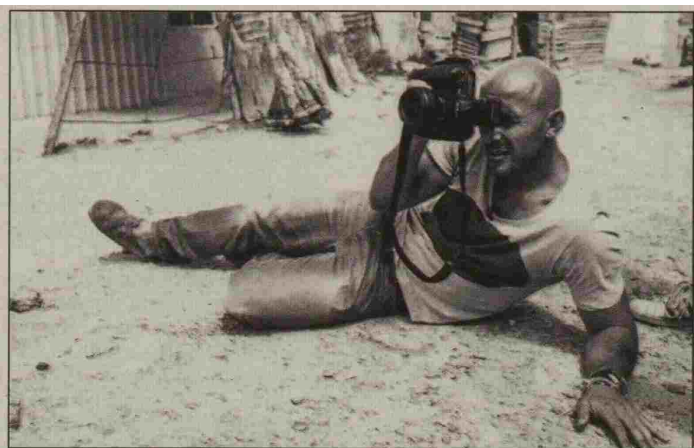
Frene Ginwala



George Bizos



Kumi Naidoo



Filmmaker Adrian Steirn

## Gift of the Givers.

Although some of our most powerful leaders are destroying the legacy of the ANC, that can't be used to write off the whole country, Steirn says. "Poor government shouldn't be the litmus test for how robust a community is. It's a misnomer that there are no extraordinary people living in the now."

He cites numerous ways in which South Africa triumphed when people predicted disaster: the first democratic elections in 1994, the Rugby World Cup in 1995 and

the 2010 Soccer World Cup. "People say they were miracles, but the definition of a miracle is something out of the ordinary that's never going to be repeated. South Africa keeps repeating its successes and keeps moving forwards despite all the issues."

The latest series is not the 21 greatest South Africans, it is 21 really good stories, he says. "I have done five shoots in the past seven days and every time you walk away you think 'what an amazing human - can you believe the goodwill and

## the human spirit?"

The shoots take almost a full day, building up a camaraderie that makes the interviews filmed at the end feel very intimate. The portraits themselves are souvenir quality, with the ideas for the quirky poses coming from Steirn and his team after extensive research into each personality.

One of the original *21 Icons* was Kumi Naidoo, the International Executive Director of Greenpeace. "If I could vote for anybody to be president, I'd vote for him," Steirn says.

Naidoo was photographed in a rubber dingy in a forest, illustrating that he will go anywhere to fight injustice. Naidoo admits that the pose initially made him uncomfortable. "It was completely outside my comfort zone."

"Just a couple of months earlier I'd been hanging off a rig in the Arctic doing serious protest action and suddenly I'm in a rowing boat in a forest. After I got over the initial shock I thought it's quite interesting actually, because protecting forests is critical for climate change, and we are running out of time with our oceans collapsing so it's not a bad connection. I think in choosing that you see a little bit of the genius and creativity of Adrian," he says.

Naidoo was humbled and embarrassed when he was asked to participate alongside his icons Mandela, Tutu and Bizos. "It's not really me being an icon because most of my work is with ordinary people, so I accepted the honour because it's celebrating the importance of ordinary people trying to make a difference and be part of the solution to the problems we have."

He believes *21 Icons* is vital for celebrating people who are willing to say unconventional things, will not accept the status quo and challenge the increasing problem of inequality. "We need leaders who see themselves as servants of the people, not as our masters," Naidoo says.

"We really need to question the kind of leaders that our country and the world needs, not this sort of leadership that comes with the entitlement of cars and houses and homesteads. If people don't have electricity, food and education then good leaders put the needs of the constituents they are supposedly elected to serve before their own," he says. "That is the spirit we had during the liberation struggle and it's sad to see that spirit badly impacted by the way we have put the interests of leaders ahead of the interests of ordinary people."

As well as courageous leaders we need more ordinary people to stand up and participate, Naidoo urges.

When you ask Steirn to name his favourite personality, he doesn't automatically pick Mandela, although he is instantly mentioned. "To spend time with Mandela was a revelation, but I can't tell you anything that no one knows about Mandela or Tutu or De Klerk. And I will go on record right now that some of the others are no less extraordinary."

The first series of *21 Icons* took five years to achieve, since he had to persuade the greatest names in the country to open themselves up to an unknown project. "Once we got Mandela, Tutu and De Klerk on board everyone else gave us access. Once people understood the idea we were welcomed into their homes and they were so supportive," he says.

Convincing broadcasters and sponsors to support a multimedia approach rather than a TV series was another challenge, but it worked beautifully. The stunning portraits ran over 21 weeks locally and in *The Times* of London, *The Australian* and *The Wall Street Journal*, which also created a website featuring each interview. Mandela's portrait - the last one ever taken - ran in 58 000 newspapers around the world. When Nadine Gordimer died, her *21 Icons* portrait appeared in 12 000 publications.

The original series is still enjoying massive success, with the portraits and films recently exhibited at Joburg's Museum Of African Design. Schools took their pupils to the museum to learn about these role models and debate the difference between a bystander and an "up stander".

● *The second season began on August 3 with a new icon airing on SABC3 every Sunday at 8.27pm. All 21 of the three-minute films will be shown on Freedom Day, April 27, next year.*

*The original photographs, signed by the icon, will be auctioned for a charity of their choice.*

● *Catch the sixth icon of 21 Icons South Africa Season II - traditionalist, conservationist and environmentalist, Grace Masuku - on SABC3 tonight at 8.27pm.*