

The master jester



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“
We are the luckiest people in the world in this country. We could have been every horror story in the country
PIETER-DIRK UYS”

FAVOURITE AUNT Evita Bezuidenhout pictured in Cape Town as part of photographer Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons SA series PHOTOS: GARY VAN WYK

Satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, who has been using comedy and caricature to poke fun at the state for the past 30 years, is the 11th icon of the second season of **21 Icons**.
In the portrait, the master jester mischievously photobombs a bust of apartheid architect and former prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd. It celebrates his ability to infuse himself in the joke and his role as an audacious political satirist. The portrait draws attention to his capacity to engage an audience through humour while sending a powerful political message in the process - an appealing alternative to more traditional political activism.
In an intimate conversation, Uys reveals that his alter ego, Evita Bezuidenhout, first started as a character in a newspaper column. "Between 1978 and 1980, I had a weekly column in a Sunday newspaper, and I needed it because the apartheid government banned all my plays."
The plays had been banned, he says, because they portrayed South Africans living in a situation that was reputed to be normal and Christian, and civilised - but was not. His characters reflected the confusions and hypocrisies of this society, earning him the outrage of the apartheid government, which lashed out at him for blasphemy, obscenity and setting racial groups against each other - "which was great, coming from the architects of apartheid".
Not that Uys set out to be incendiary. The child of a Jewish German immigrant mother and an Afrikaans father, Uys' childhood was marked by bullying - until he realised that laughter was an effective weapon. As a playwright, he tried to harness his talent for comedy, creating entertainment and making people laugh - although he confesses that there is a small part of him that was also trying to anger them.
"It's as if there was a 12-year-old inside of me that was sticking out my tongue at Verwoerd."
This is ironic coming from a man who was raised to believe

COMIC ICON



PHOTO: ADRIAN STEIRN



NATIONAL TREASURE Pieter-Dirk Uys helps people to laugh at their fears

that Verwoerd was untouchable, and who idolised ministers to the point where he wrote them letters. It was only as a university student that Uys realised that the principles he had grown up with were not incontestable.
"There were some coloured students at university, and we were told that we couldn't have tea together, couldn't eat together, couldn't walk together and couldn't sleep together. And I think sleeping together actually broke apartheid down for me. Because God did not strike me down the next day. It began a process of exploration, a process of fighting everything you know, your conscience, your Christian Calvinist background, the Ten Commandments, all the nonsense that you grew up with and then you realise that it is all nonsense and you just have to find your own values. And not demean those values for millions of people who still believe in them, but try to bring them up."
"I tried to help my audience to laugh at their fear, because that is what I do. The things I am frightened of I will not look away from. I grew up with fear. I looked away from everything."
Having performed more than 20 plays and 30 revues, and one-man shows both in South Africa and around the world, Uys is committed to helping his audiences share his courage.
Although the era of apartheid may be over, he still finds plenty of subjects - from the comic to the controversial - to tackle, including South Africa's new political regime and HIV.
"In the 20th year of democracy, I'm still trying to reflect the 'mock' in democracy and the 'con' in reconciliation with humour," he says.

- Watch Pieter-Dirk Uys today on SABC3 at 8:27pm
- For more information, visit 21icons.com
- Download Zappor for free from your app store, zap the thunderbolt icon, watch the trailer and see all the portraits done so far

