

Leading lady

This week 21 Icons celebrates the 21st and final icon of its second season: **Sandra Prinsloo**, the doyenne of South African stage and screen. The 21 Icons portrait features Prinsloo kissing a shadow projected on to a white background. It depicts the kiss she shared with fellow icon John Kani during apartheid in Athol Fugard's adaptation of the play *Miss Julie*.

In an intimate conversation, Prinsloo talked about her life as a stage and screen actress in a career that has spanned decades.

"I was a ballet dancer from a very early age and I remember that I occasionally ushered at the Breitenbach Theatre in Pretoria when I was in high school. That's the first time I came into contact with professional stage acting, but I never thought I'd be an actress. It wasn't something I ever thought I would do. I think I was far too shy in those days to ever think I could be an actress. So it wasn't like I had this great big burning passion to become an actress, not at all. I preferred an academic life, in a way. When I went to university, I thought that was going to be what I was going to do."

After matriculating from the Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool, Prinsloo completed her BA honours in drama at the University of Pretoria, joining the Performing Arts Council Transvaal acting company in that year.

"One night we were performing and it was as if something absolutely magical happened. It was as if a golden net was cast down. Everything was magical that evening and everybody felt it in the cast ... it was something enchanting that happens in the exchange of the energy between the audience and the actors."

After that night, she realised this was her calling and could not imagine any other place where she could live in such magic - even if it was for an hour or two.

Years later, Prinsloo moved to the old Market theatre and became increasingly aware of South Africa's political divide. She told photographer Adrian Stein she had a lot of anger towards Afrikaners.

"Being an Afrikaner, being part of that and thinking that I don't want to be part of this."

She said it had been incredible how South Africa had changed and how far the country had come.

"Now I am proud to be an Afrikaner, but in those days I did not say that and I did not feel proud ... I worked in English for many years, maybe because of that, because I didn't identify myself with the Afrikaner race in a way."

Besides Prinsloo's popularity as an actress and artist, her career has not been without controversy. Her involvement with, and concern for, the racial situation in South Africa is well known beyond the borders of this country. Her appearance in the title role of *Miss Julie* opposite John Kani in 1985 was met with threats of bombs and assaults. She was the first white South African actress to appear on stage in love scenes with a black actor and was ostracised by many South Africans. "I thought it would cause a stir, but I didn't think it would cause a minor

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ROLE PLAY Photographer Adrian Stein directs Sandra Prinsloo during the portrait shoot for 21 Icons

revolution. People were very small-minded and I suppose you live in a bit of a fool's paradise when you're an actor. You live in a very free-thinking environment that is very supportive. I knew it was going to cause a stir because a lot of things used to cause an uproar in those days.

"I knew Kani well and we often talked about racism. I was always against it and found it very hurtful that people experienced such discrimination, especially working at The Market theatre, which was all-embracing. I felt ashamed."

Over the many years of her career, Prinsloo has performed leading roles in the plays of renowned dramatists - local and international. She has been in more than 100 different productions. She has also successfully tried her hand at directing and as a television host, and has won several national and international awards.

Among her movie roles was the female lead in *Tigers Don't Cry* opposite Anthony Quinn and the memorable *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which had tremendous international success.

Her television roles range from well-loved soapies like *Egoli* to classic plays like Chekov's *The Seagull*. Prinsloo received a television award for her role in Jean Cocteau's *The Human Voice*. The television production of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* was screened in most European countries.

The beloved star was granted the Order of Ikhamanga by President Jacob Zuma for her "excellent contribution in the field of the performing arts and applying her talents in the

SPOKEN TRUTH



IN BLACK AND WHITE
PHOTO: ADRIAN STEIN

I think acting is telling people stories, telling important stories and hoping to change people through stories
- Sandra Prinsloo

creative arts to take a stand against racism".

Prinsloo is passionate about the arts in South Africa and echoed the words spoken at the inaugural 21 Icons Campus Dialogue earlier this year where the spotlight was turned on the role the arts have played in advancing the Constitution. Wit Theatre director Gita Parher said the war against apartheid was articulated through the words of playwrights, novelists, poets, the lyrics and melodies of musicians, the storytelling of a plethora of artists and art forms. And they suffered - they were banned and beaten, silenced and even murdered. Through all this, the arts continued to play a pivotal role.

Prinsloo said of the arts: "It is healthy in South Africa in terms of the talent, but not healthy in terms of finance. We need government funding. I think it's one of my personal crusades. Actors, singers, dancers and musicians are still freelancing and hanging around as they have no home to go to. They have no security. They're very much like gypsies travelling around and I think it's an unhealthy state for us to be in. Eventually, the artists run out of steam and become depressed, and we lose a lot of talent."

"In the opera world and the music world, we are losing a lot of talent to Europe and America - wherever they find work. It's too hard in South Africa and there is no support. It's just too hard to always have to battle," she said.

Watch Sandra Prinsloo on SABC3 at 8.27pm today
For more information, visit www.21icons.com