



**PORTRAIT OF A MASTER** Adrian Steirn photographs veteran photographer Peter Magubane during the 21 Icons portrait shoot in Soweto, Johannesburg

PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK

**T**his week, 21 Icons SA shines the spotlight on the 17th icon of its second season: Peter Magubane, an internationally acclaimed photographer known for documenting the rise and fall of apartheid, as well as the dramatic events and daily life during this brutal time.

The portrait of Magubane included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. A charity of his choice will be the recipient of the funds.

The portrait is shot in Alexandra, a typical township setting, similar to where Magubane took many of his photographs. It features Magubane taking a photograph with his camera placed inside a hollowed-out loaf of bread to dupe the police into thinking that he was eating the bread - he had done this in the past at many major political events during apartheid to avoid arrest.

In an intimate conversation, Magubane, who grew up in Sophiatown, talks about being inspired by photography at a young age. He started out doing photography using a Kodak Brownie as a schoolboy.

"I used to take shots of my schoolmates and I realised that I could do something with this."

Inspired by the works of great photographers of the day, he used to buy Life magazine, Time magazine and Der Spiegel, and lap up images by Robert Capa and others.

"An opportunity arose at Drum magazine as a driver and, wanting to be like the American photographers, this was my one shot to get there," Magubane says.

After three months at Drum as a messenger and driver, Magubane made his name known to layout artist Jürgen Schadeberg, who trained him to be his darkroom assistant until he was given his first assignment as field photographer to cover the 1955 ANC convention in Bloemfontein.

Wanting to refine his skills, initially Magubane was not capturing images for political reasons. After a meeting with Bob Gosani and Father Trevor Huddleston, Magubane realised he wanted to be a narrative photographer. He worked hard for the opportunity to be sent out with reporters Henry Nxumalo, Can Themba and Nat Nakasa.

Magubane remembers being instructed by his editor: "No one dictates terms to you. You go there and come back with the pictures. Don't tell me that you were not able to get the pictures because there were too many police, or this and that, no. I want my images."

Magubane covered many important political events during the 1950s, including the treason trials and demonstrations against the pass laws.

"I went to Rustenburg and some members of the women's league were arrested for not carrying their passes. Drum was the only magazine that went to Zeerust and captured the scene of these women being put into police vans. I bought half a loaf of bread and placed my camera inside the hollow loaf. I pretended that I was eating, but I was actually taking pictures. I successfully managed to get the photographs

I used my camera as a gun. I did not want to carry a gun and kill people. I used my camera as a weapon and I think I was very successful

- Peter Magubane

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and Drum was the only magazine that had pictures of the arrest."

He adds: "They [Drum] were dealing with social issues that affected black people in South Africa. I wanted to be part of that magazine."

Between 1955 and 1963, Magubane covered most of the major political events in the country and befriended the leading political figures of the liberation movement, in particular Nelson Mandela. He later became Madiba's official photographer in 1990 and chronicled South Africa's transition to a new political dispensation.

Magubane was the first black South African to win a photographic prize in the country when he claimed the first and third prizes for best press pictures of the year in 1958.

He then left South Africa to work as a freelance photojournalist in London in 1963 and held an exhibition of his work at the London School of Printing in 1964, becoming the first black South African to do this.

Magubane came back to South Africa in 1966 and worked for the Rand Daily Mail until 1980. From 1969 to 1976, he

was repeatedly arrested and interrogated for his activities, jailed or kept in solitary confinement for months at a time.

In June 1969, he was arrested while photographing protesters outside Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's jail cell. The charges were dropped a year later, but he was banned from taking any photographs for five years.

"I was not allowed to take pictures. It was even worse because I was black. Now I was fighting, I was fighting for my rights and to get the picture for the newspaper."

From 1978 to 1980, he was employed as a correspondent for Time magazine. In 1980, he left South Africa for New York, but soon returned because he wanted the world to see what was going on in South Africa.

"The only way to show the world is with pictures. You can write a whole book, but I'll give you one picture that will show the whole world the extent of apartheid and the kind of beast it is."

Coverage of the June 16 1976 student uprisings earned him worldwide acclaim, and led to a number of international photographic and journalistic awards, one of which was the American National Professional Photographers' Association Humanistic Award in 1986, in recognition of one of several incidents in which he put his camera aside and intervened to help prevent people from being killed.

"Photography is very important and just as important now in South Africa. For instance, the lens portrayed what was happening at Marikana. Photography will never change. Let the people eat through your camera. Let the people eat through your eyes," he says.

In recent years, he has become an art photographer, documenting the surviving tribal ways in post-apartheid South Africa. With an impressive 21 books and seven honorary doctorates, Magubane is still behind the lens working on various projects. "I'm doing sunsets, the beauty of sunsets."

● Watch Peter Magubane on SABC3 at 8.27pm today  
● For more information, visit 21icons.com



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