

# Mr Storyteller

**T**his week, 21 Icons South Africa shines the spotlight on the 15th icon of its second season: **Anant Singh**, South Africa's pre-eminent film producer, visionary and pioneer. As one of the country's leading film makers, he has produced more than 75 films, including the acclaimed *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, and is a true film-making entrepreneur.

The 21 Icons portrait features Singh standing next to a projector in a projection room.

In an intimate conversation, Singh talks about his life as a film producer. Captivated by the moving image at the tender age of eight, Singh believed the silent movies of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Laurel and Hardy were truly magical and inspired his love for film.

Born and raised in Durban, Singh worked part-time in a movie rental store while in high school, rewinding movies for R1 a day.

His father owned an 8mm camera and as a family they used to congregate on the couch and watch home videos.

Initially an engineering student (the only film school back then was for whites only), his passion for the movies never waned. At 18 he took over a business renting out films and projectors to the public.

Singh reveals how his film career expanded when he purchased a 16mm movie rental store. Withdrawing from university, he turned his attention to video distribution, forming a company called Videovision Entertainment.

In 1984, he moved into film production with *A Place of Weeping*, directed by Darrell Roodt. He says: "I think the whole film cost R50 000 to make and it was released theatrically in many countries in the world."

"It was a technically flawed film, but it had a lot of heart, and the emotional aspect of it was what engaged audiences everywhere."

This was the beginning of an illustrious career.

A selection of his subsequent feature films include the critically acclaimed *Sarafina!* (starring Whoopi Goldberg, Leleti Khumalo and Miriam Makeba); a film adaptation of Alan Paton's revered novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*; *Paljas*, an Afrikaans film directed by Katinka Heyns; and *Yesterday*, which was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 77th Academy Awards in 2005.

"Of all the big films we've been involved in, *Sarafina!* was one of the biggest we did just after Madiba was released [from prison] because it celebrated his journey in a very different way. Subsequently, we released *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which I had bought the rights to during the 80s with the view that once apartheid was destroyed, the movie should be made."

"Alan Paton wrote this amazing book and at the end of the book, he says that emancipation and freedom will come, but whether it will take a thousand years, he doesn't know."

"For me, that was the day I decided I have to proceed with this film. *Yesterday* was the first film we produced in an indigenous language and it was the first South African film to be nominated for an Academy Award."

Thrilled by the idea of producing, Singh says: "With *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, it took almost 25 years from idea to fruition. I didn't



**MOVIE MAGIC** Producer Anant Singh before the portrait shoot at Suncoast Casino in Durban for photographer Adrian Steirn's 21 Icons project

PHOTO: GARY VAN WYK



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My view on what makes a good movie and what makes a successful movie is that it has to be something fresh

**ANANT SINGH**

mind that it was frustrating at times, but ultimately, as Madiba says, it always seems impossible until it's done. So, on that premise, I soldiered on."

Work on *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* began while Madiba was in prison.

"I was writing to him to ask him about making a movie about his life. He was very modest and said: 'Does anyone want to see a movie about me?' By the time Madiba's autobiography came out, he had seen *Sarafina!* and had come to the premiere of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and he then said to me: 'You are the person I want to make this movie.'"

Trusting Singh with his story and his journey, this huge film was a worldwide success and, fortunately, Madiba was able to see it come to life before his death in December last year.

Singh says there has never been a better time for South African film.

"There are incentives available from the department of trade and industry, and there are film studios available in South Africa."

"There's also the National Film and Video Foundation, which supports emerging film makers."

- Watch Anant Singh on SABC3 at 8:27pm today
- For more information, visit21Icons.com

## THE STORYTELLER



PHOTO: ADRIAN STEIRN