

Zooming in on icons



Gary van Wyk has stepped up as principal photographer for the third season of SABC3's acclaimed short-film series '21 Icons' which showcases 21 inspirational young South Africans. **Cornelia le Roux** talks to the talented 34-year-old lensman

21 ICONS has been tracing South Africa's history over the course of its three seasons, moving from the fight for freedom to the country's growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future.

Inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela, previous seasons' icons included social masters such as George Bizos, Nadine Gordimer, Desmond Tutu, Albie Sachs, Hugh Masekela and Sophie Williams de Bruyn.

● You step up as principal photographer for the third season. How has the change been?

Diving head-on into this huge challenge has changed my life and I think that being the principal photographer has taken my work to the next level. I've discovered exactly what I'm capable of producing.

● How has it been taking over from Adrian Steirn?

Taking over from Adrian is both a challenge and an honour. We have very different personalities, which influences the photographs, and being in front of the camera is a new experience for me.

Adrian's work in the first two seasons has obviously set a very high standard, but that's also exciting.

● Season three no longer deals in black and white photography, but is shot in colour. Why?

Shooting this season in colour is also a change. It's a way for the project to evolve and move forward. To me black and white deals with memory, whereas colour represents the world the way it is today.

● What does the team aim to convey with season three?

I think the most important thing the team wants to convey is the energy and passion driving these young South Africans. There's so much potential being realised all the time in this country. We just want to try and capture some of it.

● How have you evolved alongside the project?

Working with the people from the first two seasons was an incredible privilege. It meant having the chance to be a part of South Africa's history.

Now in season three we are getting to meet emerging South Africans. They are all creative people in their own ways, so coming up with original concepts and working with the icons on their execution is an exciting and important challenge.

I've also loved having the chance to speak to them – finding greatness and wisdom in the most unlikely places.

● Are the short films a new challenge and a pleasure?

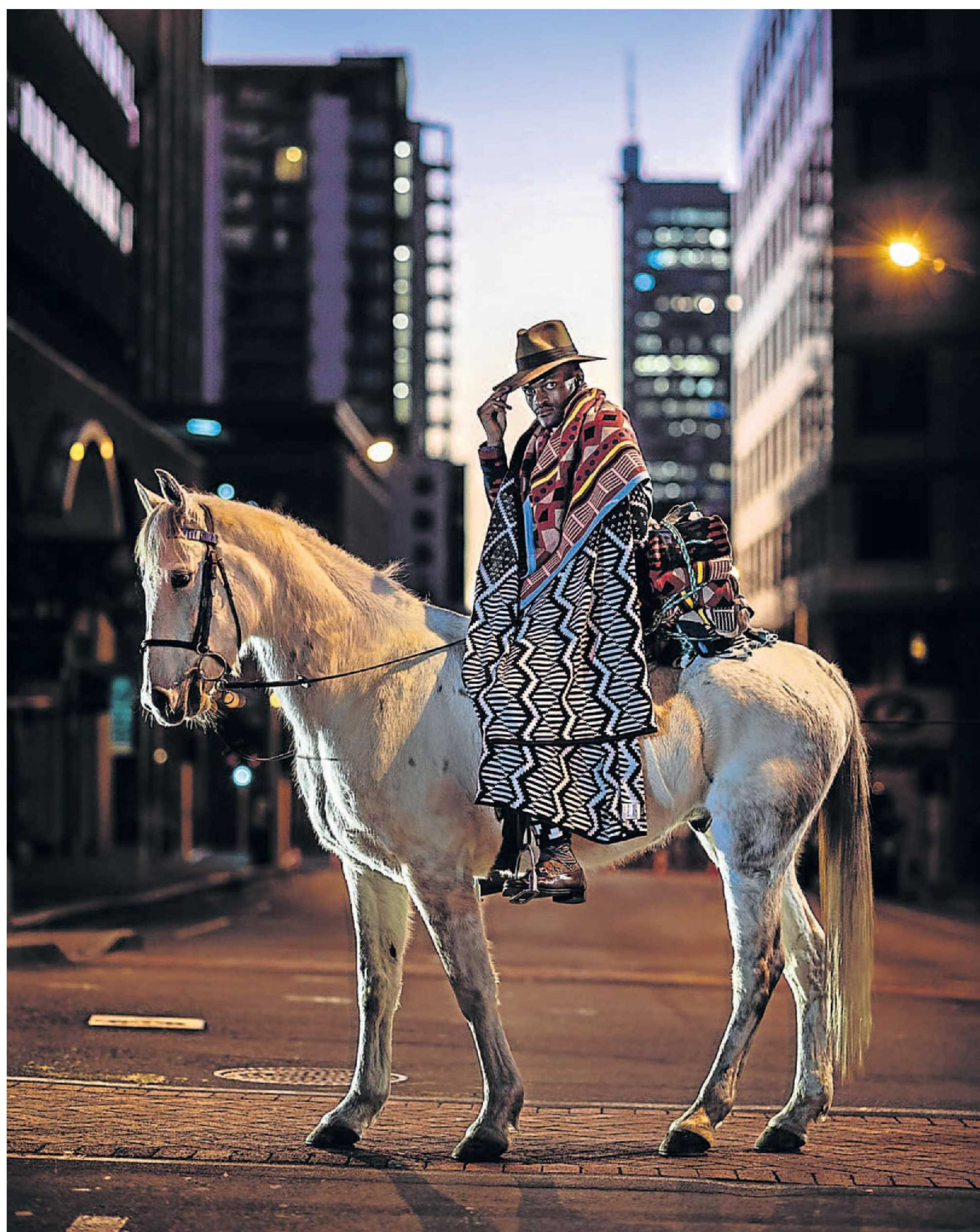
It's a real challenge for me to appear on camera and interview such remarkable people. I'm not the kind of person who likes to be on camera. That's why I'm usually behind the scenes, but I'm slowly learning to deal with it one shoot at a time.

● What goes into planning a portrait?

Locations, wardrobe and the overall colour balance all need to be decided far in advance of the actual shoot.

I also find photographing in colour is a lot more complex than black and white. You need great light for colour to come to life. But when you get it right, light is what turns the ordinary into magic.

● Has *21 Icons* given you hope for



A STITCH IN TIME: Port Elizabeth born and bred textile, knitwear and fashion designer Laduma Ngxokolo was featured two weeks ago on '21 ICONS'. Inset, Gary van Wyk
PHOTOGRAPH: GARY VAN WYK

South Africa's future?

It's impossible to live in South Africa and not be inspired by this beautiful country.

It's vibrant, colourful and diverse. Our people are so full of life. There is so much creativity coming out of our country and there always has been, so I think that I'm incredibly fortunate to have the chance to document part of it.

● How has the team chosen the young icons? The icons of the past must have been an easier task.

Once you start looking around, there are remarkable stories everywhere.

That was one of the main goals with this season – to show people there is more to South Africa than the heroes of the past. There are so many young people doing things right now that need to be celebrated, so it wasn't as tough as you might think.

● Any standout experiences during seasons one, two and three?

That's a tough one as every shoot has

its special moments. In season one, meeting and learning from Professor Phillip Tobias was one of my favourite shoots because of his humour and knowledge. And we got to listen to Hugh Masekela playing the trumpet in a forest!

In season two, I'd have to choose photographing Kitty Phetla dancing on water and meeting one of my soccer heroes, Lucas Redebe.

So far in season three, photographing Laduma Ngxokolo on a white horse in

Long Street jumps out because it was so unique and challenging to light.

● Did you always want to be a photographer?

I was always interested in art but had no experience or knowledge of photography.

I finished school when I was 17 and moved to London in 1999. During my travels I started taking pictures and decided that I wanted to become a photographer.

Something that always sticks with me is a snapshot of a sunset that I captured in the Caribbean. I processed the film when I got back to London and was blown away by the idea of being able to capture such beauty, so I came back to Cape Town to study photography in 2001.

● Favourite photographs and why?

I love photographing everyday life and everyday people. I think we become so familiar to our surroundings that we forget how beautiful the mundane can be.

I get very excited when I go out looking for unexpected moments – the things that can't be faked.

● You've travelled the seven seas and beyond. Any favourite places?

One of my favourite places is Brazil. We stayed in a town called Feijo in the Amazon, and there was such incredible beauty and lovely people.

Another favourite was Nepal. As a photographer the colour blew my mind and the people are so humble.

● Nelson Mandela, Oprah Winfrey and Desmond Tutu are among your most notable subjects. Tell us a bit about your experiences in capturing them on film.

I think when you photograph someone with such a huge presence it's not hard to make a good picture.

One of my most memorable shoots was when I walked for 25km through the hills of the Eastern Cape with Nelson Mandela's grandson, a group of senior councilmen and a few cows.

It was a symbolic walk to deliver cattle to Mandela's house on his 90th birthday. We arrived at Mandela's house to find crowds of people and journalists from all over the world waiting to get a glimpse of the man.

As the gates opened for his grandson and the councilmen, all the journalists were stopped and I was called to come inside. He told me that I was the first outsider to do the walk, and that I was part of them now.

I will never forget shaking Nelson Mandela's hand that day. It felt like my long walk to freedom.

I've also spent a lot of time with Desmond Tutu, but the most memorable was photographing him on top of Table Mountain with Robben Island in the background. It was a powerful moment with an incredible soul.

● Any of your own photographic icons?

There are loads. Henri Cartier Bresson when I started photography. Josef Koudelka, William Eggleston, David Allan Harvey, Robert Frank, Peter Magubane, Ernest Cole and Mikhael Subotsky.

● *21 Icons: Future of a Nation* is screened on Sundays on SABC3 at 7.30pm.