

Laughter and getting it right

Makgano Mamabolo talks to **Makhosazana Xaba** about, like, how she feels about being a well-known actor, and why she moved on to writing, producing and directing.

I remember when I first saw you on stage three years ago, at the Market Theatre in the one-woman show, "Miss Qwa Qwa" and you asked the audience to say the 'K' word out loud. Tell us about how you got involved.

During the holiday when I was back home my mother decided to drag me to Miss QwaQwa Radio Station. I was a total hermit and my mother said I needed a social life. I get there and of course nobody that I know is there, but actually ended up having a good time. They asked one of the contestants, one of the finalists, "So what are your hopes and dreams for QwaQwa?" and she says, with like the biggest smile, "I wish that QwaQwa can become a very big and successful country."

Of course I pack out laughing. I'm like, "Ah, she's so dumb! She's so stupid! Why do we have beauty pageants?" I started interrogating that thought. I'm all on my own, I've got nothing to do but ask myself stupid questions and I started interrogating the idea of why do we have beauty pageants, and why do we think it's a good idea as ambassadors for us? Like just because she's pretty, she must be my spokesperson to other nations. And then I thought, "If we have beauty pageants and now these

people are supposed to be our beautiful ambassadors, when you have a Miss World, who are they competing against?"

So that's how it started. I was just interrogating the idea of why so many little girls aspire to being pretty and I thought, "Okay, maybe the one incentive to being beautiful is being an ambassador." But just because you're beautiful, doesn't mean you have a brain. And why do we send out dumb people to go and represent us?

So how did that lead to the play?

When I went back to school I was like, "Ah, guys you won't believe what I just saw! Beauty queens are so dumb but we still perpetuate it." So we started having these like trash-out sessions where I would be like a beauty queen and everyone would just start asking me these random questions and we would come up with the most ridiculous answers.

I got to varsity and I met a couple of my friends and we used to do this all the time. So by the time I graduated it was like, "Okay, so what are we going to do with our careers?" I thought, "Well, I do have Miss Qwa Qwa." I approached the guy that was the best scriptwriter in the class, the guy who was the best



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producer in the class, and said like "Come, let's do this. Let's do a one-woman show."

They think it's funny, I think it's funny. Let's work on that. We did it for four years. We were at the Grahamstown Festival for two years before we came to the Market Theatre.

I have seen you in TV shows, dramas, soaps, sitcoms, in commercials. You clearly enjoy drama. Not only did you study it in 2003, you won a Merit Award for the best performance as Elicia in "Camera Boy", a short film. Tell us about that part of you.

I had to get honest with myself about why do I wanna be on TV because so many people ask me, "Can you help me get on TV?" I'm like, "Why do you wanna be on TV?" And I thought, if I'm asking people why they want to be on TV, I should ask myself, "Why do I wanna be on

TV?" Sad but true, I'm an attention seeker. I think it's important to find a healthy outlet for it. I feel I'm qualified to have attention-seeking ways. I've got a degree to prove that I'm attention-seeking so it's justified.

More recently with the SABC TV drama "Society" you decided to come from the other end, as a director. What prompted you to make that choice?

I've come to realise that acting is a need and when I started writing and producing I realised that acting is like being on the first rung of a ladder. You're the bottom of the food-chain when it comes to the hierarchy of the entertainment industry. You're the face of the programme, and that's about it. You're the mouth-piece of the writer and you are at the mercy of the producer's budget.

But, when you're acting you don't think that because you're in an industry that is so caught up with pampering you. You get so caught up in being the star of the show. So when I started doing other things I realised that acting doesn't really completely fulfill me, which is why I decided to write.

I wanna be responsible for the things I say. If people are gonna remember me for being the face of Surf, I wanna be at least the face of Surf with an opinion. And that's why I decided to write and produce and then I thought, "Well why don't I just stop if I know it's all stupid." I realised I can't and I got really sad and depressed about that.

There must be something though that interests you a great deal about acting.

Acting - there's something about being somebody else that I enjoy and I realise that half the time it's about getting it right. Getting Khosi's mannerisms right, the way she eats



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her cake, about getting into the mind of someone like Khosi. Why is a woman your age having your own fantastic life doing this interview with me on a Sunday afternoon? I realised that really fascinates me. It makes me very happy to get it right.

Well, it makes me happy to interview a young woman who is curious about her actions, choices and decisions. A woman who reflects on her life. Let's go back to "Society", which you wrote and produced.

Society was the first show that I decided to, not only write for, but produce. When I started acting, I realised I wasn't happy with the roles I was getting. As the black girl who is short and a bit chubby, you will always be the girl that is in the comic role. Now as much as that makes me happy, I wanna do other things.

So I decided, I'm gonna write stories that girls like me can act in, that are meaty, substantial, that are

worth me sitting in front of the TV. I started writing and I realised, "Yes, I wrote and I'm happy, but the execution is not what I wrote. What I'm seeing on TV is not what I wrote." And it would frustrate me because I don't have creative control over the things I write. You hand it over and the director turns it into whatever he wants.

And most directors are "hes"?

Exactly and most producers are "hes". So I decided, I'm gonna produce the work I write no matter what it takes. And it took me two years although it was only four episodes. I decided I was gonna write the show of my dreams.

I thought it was a show of South African dreams. Am I right in saying it's been seen abroad as well?

It showed at the *Gay and Lesbian Film Festival*, it has just returned from Mexico and there are plans for it to travel further.

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