

# No longer muted screams

## Voice of Lindiwe Nkutha

### Makhosazana Xaba

interviews **Lindiwe Nkutha**

a rising South African voice in an astonishing range of media forms: film, novels, poetry, short stories and photography.

***You were trained as an accountant, why did you break with accounting?***

Utter boredom. The ritual of working and the preoccupation of career and pressures to succeed and make it in that world. The microcosm being the office space, as symbolised by uncomfortable clothes, fluorescent lights, protocol, hierarchy. The ceiling in that profession was becoming a CA and I was determined to become one. When I was two steps away from the summit I realised: this is not it.

***Your first movie 'muted screams', how did that come about?***

Around 2000/2001 I went to see a life coach/therapist and she asked me: "What would you *really* rather be doing? And I gave her a long list and she gave me a book *The Artist's Way* and said, "Go read this and see what happens."

All the stories in that book stuck with me. I would hear them when taking showers in the morning and

I would go back to that space over and over again. There was one particular story that made an impression on me. It's the story of a Harvard professor who dropped everything and went to film school so I started telling people I wanna make movies.

Then about two years later, I said this to one guy who said, *Out in Africa* will be running a workshop on making films and they are looking for people to train to make two minute films to show at the *Out in Africa Film Festival*. Should I give them your name? I said sure and later I got selected alongside ten other people. This was in 2003.

The workshop was called *Just a minute*. We were trained to make a film in one week, from coming up with an idea, to writing the story, shooting and editing it. Ja, so that was the making of 'muted screams'.

***How did you decide what movie to make? 'muted screams' is an autobiographical film on coming out as a lesbian.***

The brief from *Out in Africa* was, make an autobiographical film about your lesbian or gay experiences. And for a lot of time I battled with how to do that story because I had thought enough about it to be able to write it, but not film it. I think I struggled longer than everybody else in the workshop. Then, I remembered that a year earlier I had written a poem called 'muted screams' so I went back to that poem and I read it over and over again (see inside back cover). I created images around it and that's what became the film. I

think I went slightly off tangent because the brief was to go back to a specific moment and highlight when we felt uncomfortable about our sexuality and I couldn't do that. I couldn't go back to a specific moment. I wanted the bigger, broader picture.

***Where was the film shown?***

All the films that came out of the workshop were given primacy during the *Out in Africa Film Festival*. My film was shown in Johannesburg and Cape Town in 2003 and again in 2004. In 2005 I was informed that my film had been selected for the *London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival*, a couple of months later it went to Philadelphia, then Los Angeles, Brazil, Japan. It's been absolutely everywhere.

***From 'muted screams' you moved to 'Joburg Rising', a longer documentary that's shown on the large screen and on SABC television. In between you wrote and published short stories, poetry and photography that became part of exhibitions and multi-media stories. How do you see yourself: filmmaker, writer, poet?***

I don't think of myself as a photographer, or a writer. I think of myself as a story teller. When a story makes contact with my head, it tells me in what way it wants to come up. Increasingly in 2004 I was getting a sense of images frozen in time. I realised that photography would give me an inroad to that because that's what it is – images frozen in time. That's how the



Hannelie de Klerk

photo essay 'This way we bleed' came about. This came side by side with *Jocasta's Hairballs* a story I told in textbook form and film. Both were exhibited at *Ansisters*, a women-only multi media and art exhibition in 2005.

**Let's talk about the short stories. How is writing different from film and photography?**

I think that writing is possibly the most liberating way of telling stories because the limit is your imagination. You can make people fly, you can make birds crash, you can do wonderful things with text that you can't do with film or photography. With writing you can go as wild as you like. There's no cost consideration, no crew, no waiting for the right light, no reliance on other people. It's just you and the page.

**You are also writing a novel, tell us about that.**

I am writing this story of this very odd crazy woman who constantly moves between the present and the past and tries to make sense and peace with the present.

**Are you telling stories through poetry right now?**

Of all the ways I speak I am least

confident about poetry. I am happy to let it come in dribs and drabs. My poetry was part of that project *Art for Humanity*. My poem was displayed on a billboard in Mbroka. I took a picture of it and my sister took the family to see it.

**Back to 'Joburg Rising'.**

When I was taking photography classes my teacher said, "Go and take pictures of anything that you like." I like the Carlton Centre. I have great memories of it. For many days between 6.30 and 7am I was at the Carlton Centre trying to find ways of taking pictures without drawing attention to myself. Then I noticed that by the time I arrived there were people already there. I asked myself, who are these people? I was fascinated. The same people who had been in the streets early in the morning were the same who were packing up late at night. I fell in love with the idea of documenting these people, and I framed it as the invisible people.

**The SABC trained you to do a documentary and it was shown at the Encounters Festival. How did you choose the three individuals in your movie.**

After interviewing many people I was drawn to three, instinctively. But part of the reason I chose them

was that their stories were consistent each day that I spoke to them. The people are a car guard, beggar and street vendor.

**Do street workers identify as workers?**

None of them thought what they did was work. They said, "I'm looking for work, this is something I am doing to survive." Even a woman with the biggest vegetable stock will tell you, "I am doing this until I find a real job". They see *formal employment* as work.

**What's next?**

I am working on the novel and a collection of poetry and I will be going to study film in Paris or New York. The Ford Foundation will fund my studies. LB

*Lindiwe Nkutha's 'Jocasta's Hairballs' is available from Xarra Books; her short stories: 'The Glass Pecker in 180°' is in 'New Fiction by South African Women Writers'; 'Rock in African Road' in 'New Writing from Southern Africa' (2006); '69 Jerusalem Road' in 'Chimurenga'; 'Confessions of Karelina' upcoming in 'Open' an anthology of erotica. Her movies are available from Out in Africa and SABC.*