

Review

Khabzela: The life and times of a South African

Liz McGregor (Jacana Media, 2005). Reviewed by Nkululeko Nkomo

My own first encounter with Fana 'Khabzela' Khaba's radio show on YFM was by coincidence. It was during one of those Sunday mornings when I did not have much to do. Previously, I had heard friends and acquaintances rave about his unique style, but before that Sunday, I had never really bothered to tune into his show. What started off as an experiment turned into a regular feature for my Sunday mornings.

There is no doubt that the most significant attraction of the personality of 'Khabzela' was for me his 'kasie' (location or township) inspired presentation style and personality. This was a rather different and fresh approach - contrary to the ubiquitous, and mostly American influenced forms of radio deejaying that have become so commonplace in our radio stations in this country. In turn, I believe this made him an accessible and iconic figure among a large listenership of Gauteng's most popular youth radio station. What stood out about the person of 'Khabzela' was his charisma and common touch.

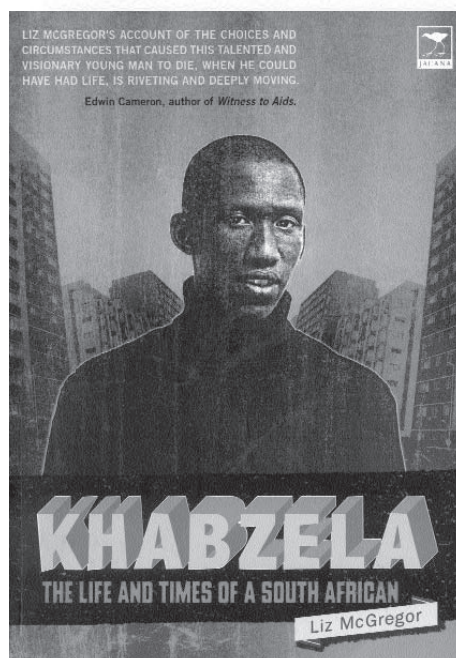
These are some of the details recounted in the book *Khabzela: The life and times of a South African*. What

started off for the author as a fulfillment of a request made by an American magazine for people living with HIV for a story of an HIV positive South African celebrity developed into a much deeper interest in Fana Khaba's life. After being away from South Africa for 17 years working as a journalist in London, in the author's words Khabzela's life story encapsulated "every twist of the drama that had transformed my country during my

long absence".

Khabzela came from humble beginnings in Soweto and then worked a stint as a taxi driver. When an opportunity presented itself for him to explore one of his life long dreams to become a deejay he took it and ran with it. Up until his passing from the complications of HIV/AIDS, he had been not only a popular deejay both on and off radio, he had also started to make a mark as a compiler of popular house and kwaito tunes.

The book presents a retrospective account of his life through mostly the interviews conducted with the important people in his life. These included his friends, colleagues, family, medical personnel, as well as the members of the alternative healing community that he consulted at the time of his illness. Inevitably, as acknowledged by the author, this has certain weaknesses since no story is better told than by the subject concerned. Each account, though, is woven together to provide a glimpse into the many influences and choices that affected Fana Khaba's life, including what proved fatal



"It is safe to say that Fana Khaba (Khabzela) was fantastically promiscuous. Fana himself was entirely open, not to say boastful, about his exuberant sex life... When I had lunch with him six months before he died, he told me he frequently had three women queuing outside his bedroom door to have sex with him. There was an unabashed, if slightly unbinged, tone to his other boast to me, "I drive around Soweto and look at all these women with their HIV-positive children and think: they're all mine. Mine and God's"... Sleeping with the same woman was part of his bonding mechanism with his close friends. Said Satch: "There is one woman who was chowed by Khabzela. Now she is being chowed by Kumza." When he became a celebrity, the temptations - and the pressures on him to perform - snowballed. Satch claimed there were sometimes five girls a night." (Khabzela The life and times of a South African)

in the end, his decision to discontinue the use of antiretrovirals (ARVs).

The subject of HIV/AIDS in this country has become much politicised. What emerges from the book aptly reveals how Fana Khaba's decision to stop using ARVs was mired in the continuing controversy of ARVs versus alternative nutrition based treatment and therapies. Also, it transpired from the book that in the face of imminent death 'Khabzela' and his family became increasingly desperate, resorting to all measures to resuscitate his health. According to the author, what was needed was unflinching adherence to an 'unequivocal orthodoxy'. I must say that even though I understand the view expressed by the author; I do think that human nature is like that, especially in times of great distress and difficulty. In particular, one would imagine how difficult all this must have been for Fana Khaba, his impending death, right at the height of his success and achievement.

As mentioned previously, this gripping story is relayed through interviews with the various people that crossed his life. What I found striking about all this is the extent to which it would appear that the author developed very meaningful relationships with some of the people that she interviewed. I believe that this further enriched the story she conveys through this

book, and must have made it seem all worthwhile in the end for the people involved. Her interviews were conducted informally, for example at coffee shops, restaurants and pubs. This must have endeared her to the interviewees and it was certainly of great benefit to the overall quality of the information she solicited. However, it is also clear from the book that her interest on 'Khabzela' made some people uneasy, including Fana Khaba's family.

The author provides a very lucid presentation of the physical devastation wrought by the virus on 'Khabzela'. This is enhanced by the presentation of some of the medical records on his condition. Overall, the quality and extent of her research into Khabzela's life is also very impressive. Not only has the author provided an extensive background on his life, but one also gets a glimpse into things that inspired the man and what made him tick (for example, his sophisticated taste for the finer things in life).

One disconcerting perspective offered by the author for me was the view that 'Khabzela' "sexualised most interactions with women" (see excerpt in box). I think this left me wondering whether this could really have been the case or was it simply a reflection of his deteriorating state of mind at the time they met. The author earlier

acknowledges elsewhere in the book her realisation of the impact that the virus had on his mind on the few occasions that they met just before he passed away. It would be interesting to speculate how the story to emerge from the book would have been told had it been recounted by one of his contemporaries.

Apart from a few reservations that I have touched on above, I do think that this is a story well told and written. The way the book is written is accessible. I think it also adds to the growing body of knowledge on the psychological effects that this epidemic has on individuals and families. It further elucidates the link between culture, spirituality and the response to HIV/AIDS. Thus, it is recommended reading for anyone with an interest in these subjects. I hope that this story serves to inspire and encourage more openness and constructive engagement on some of the issues that the book is raising, including the issue of antiretroviral treatment and alternative treatment therapies. Most of all, I hope that his fans learn from his mistakes and heed the message inherent in the way that he lived and died.

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