

Terry Pheto

"Storytelling has the power to make people forget their reality and - whether it's film or television - for those 30 minutes or two hours, you can learn someone else's story." - Terry Pheto



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Short-film series *21 ICONS* has featured the 19th icon of its third season: 34-year-old, Terry Pheto who is best known for her role as the leading actress in the 2006 Oscar-winning Foreign Language Film, *Tsotsi*.

She is also the award-winning producer of the critically acclaimed *Ayanda* which has been picked up by *Selma* director, Ava DuVernay, for international distribution.

Pheto has been selected for *21 ICONS* South Africa Season 3 for the strides she has made in her career in recent years as well as the impact and contribution she has made to the South African film and television industry. Pheto has also started producing her own work with the goal of pushing the agenda of women in film and broader society. In 2015, she was chosen as a juror for the International Emmy Awards.

Born in Evaton township in 1981, at the age of 10 she had her first stint in the spotlight when she was cast as Nzwaki in a school play - a musical tribute to bid farewell to her then headmaster.

She says, "It was at that moment that I realised you can become someone else. It's possible and there's power in that, there's power in being able to be someone else and just forget about yourself and I was hooked from then."

Pheto was raised in a shack until she was 19 and after matriculating from high school she studied Information Technology for two semesters but was unable to complete her studies for financial reasons.

"I wasn't able to go to the best schools, but that has never stopped me from learning every day from every person that I meet. The minute you stop learning, you might as well die," she notes.

Pheto convinced her mother to let her pursue her lifelong dream to become an actress. She moved to Soweto to join the Soweto Community Theatre Group and two months later she was discovered by talent scout Moonyeenn Lee.

After a year of auditions she was cast as the leading female role in *Tsotsi* directed by Gavin Hood. The film won the Best Foreign Language Film at the 78th Academy Awards.

Pheto was 24 and looking back she reflects on how attending the ceremony was surreal and admits that she was star struck, "It was the most out of body experience, the most incredible thing that anyone can ever experience."

In 2010, Pheto spread her wings and started a production company called Leading Lady Productions and produced her first film, *Ayanda*, in 2014 - 10 years after her debut in *Tsotsi*.

Her first role model was her mother and she explains the importance of being an individual that other women can look up to; "I never had anyone in the industry who was a mentor. No one told me anything when I was starting out. I want to be that person to someone younger than myself."

She has been chosen as one of the first South African artist ambassadors for Save the Children South Africa which aims to ensure that every child, especially the most vulnerable, attain the right to education, survival, protection, development and participation.

About the portrait

For the portrait '*Leading Lady*', Van Wyk describes the visual elements, "A beaded "Oscar" laying to her right - a reference to her starring role in the Academy-Award winning film *Tsotsi* - Pheto, clad in a tuxedo, is photographed seated in an empty theatre leaning toward the camera. Her expression strong and focused, Pheto is depicted as a formidable force within the film industry, a resilient woman whose grit has seen her rise from township theatre performer to South Africa's leading lady."

On the future of South Africa she says, "Knowing that with all the scars we have, there's still hope, there's still love, and there's still a need for us to be present and to stand up for what's right."

She concludes by saying, "You can be whoever you want to be. You have to believe in and trust yourself. If you can imagine it, there is no reason why you can't have it. There is room for all of us to chase our dreams."

View the video

About 21 Icons Season 3

The short film-series documents the conversations between Gary Van Wyk as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.

Behind each portrait lies a carefully planned concept that captures not only the essence of each icon visually, but also in spirit and in terms of their unique legacy.

Season three of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa.

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