

Albie Sachs

Albie Sachs - "I'm proud of our flag ... It represents the triumph of humanity, the will to find a common basis for living together in one country." (Video)

ICONS South Africa features the first icon in the acclaimed series 21 ICONS season two, Albie Sachs, former judge of the Constitutional Court. Sachs talks about his role in drafting the Constitution and why it matters to South Africa while the series aims to highlight the lives and work of men and women who, uniquely and undeniably, have shaped the world as we know it.

21 ICONS is an annual collection of unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, who is one of Africa's pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers. Steirn comments, "I've met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful - it's a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them."



For the portrait, Sachs stands on a rock against the background of a dramatic, grey sky as depicted by filmmaker and founder of the project, Adrian Steirn.

The 21 ICONS South Africa portrait of Albie Sachs will be sold at a charity auction later in the year and Sachs has nominated The Constitutional Court Trust, which owns and maintains an extraordinary collection of artworks donated by prominent artists and other benefactors to celebrate the Court's role in the transition to democracy, as the recipient of the funds.

In an evocative symmetry, he holds in his left hand a billowing South African flag, while the sleeve of his right arm flaps emptily to the side. Adrian Steirn says that the portrait, with Sachs looking up at his country's flag, was conceptualised to reflect his sacrifice, forgiveness and dedication to upholding justice, as well as his commitment to a democratic South Africa.



Sachs doesn't see the loss of his arm - an injury he sustained when his anti-Apartheid activities saw him become a victim of a car bomb attack - as a disability. To the contrary, in an intimate conversation with Steirn: "Losing my arm was part of a journey that brought great happiness to me ... and led to a world where my seven-year-old son won't have to fight the way we had to fight."

For Sachs, growing up in a home where both parents were politically active, fighting was perhaps inevitable - although he's quick to say that his fight was never against racism; rather, it was for human beings. "My mother was a typist for Moses Kutani, a leader in the African community. She used to say to us, 'tidy up, tidy up, Uncle Moses is coming'. And it wasn't Moses Cohen or Moses Rabinowitz, it was Moses Kutani. So the respect for the

African man was strong, it was there right from the beginning. So was the sense that if the world and the society in which we grew up didn't acknowledge that ordinary respect, there was something wrong with that society. It had to change. From my earliest days, it was about respecting human beings for what they are." Sachs adds that, as a child, his parents wrote him a letter encouraging him to commit to the struggle; an incident that went on to shape his life.

In the short film, he recalls that when he was very young when he became aware that if you wish for a world better than the one you're living in, something is very wrong. Not that the world he grew up in was a bad one: he has wonderful memories of growing up near Cape Town's beaches, and of being surrounded by a vibrant, loving community - all of whom happened

to be staunchly anti-Apartheid.

Nonetheless, it was only when Sachs was in his second year at the University of Cape Town that he put his ideologies to action. Until then, he admits to being entirely apolitical: "I didn't even know who to vote for in the student elections". He spent his time playing cricket, climbing mountains and writing poetry - until the day his mother told him he should attend a lecture by poet Uys Krige. "People always ask me why I brought culture into politics ... actually, it was the other way around."



Sachs explains that, after being introduced by Krige to the works of Lorca and Neruda, everything came together for him. "I was ready for action ... and a few months later I was sitting on a bench marked 'non-whites only' as Sachs' anti-Apartheid activities saw him imprisoned in solitary confinement twice like fellow ICONS, Nelson Mandela and Ahmed Kathrada of Season I series, and ultimately exiled, first in London and then Mozambique.



And then, in 1988, came the car bomb that would change his life. In addition to his arm, the bomb took the sight in one eye - and yet, Sachs insists that the event "brought back an energy and vitality and rightness", and that even if he could, he wouldn't return to the way he was. Nor does he resent the people who tortured him: his philosophy is that living with rage eats you up.

"You live with a sense of transcendence, of getting beyond, of transformation and it elevates you, and it makes it possible for you to live with a sense, not of immunity, but with a sense of dignity and pride. And you're not waiting for retaliation, you're not in the world of hit and hit back. We are in the world of looking in the eyes of the other and seeing the possibilities that human beings have, of bringing about real change," Sachs says.

He brought this spirit to life as one of the authors of the Constitution and a Constitutional Court judge; a role he says "was part of dreams, of our destiny, of our life, of our thinking".

Although he balks at the idea of iconoclasm, there's no doubt that he is a global icon for human rights: the recent recipient of Taiwan's inaugural Tang Prize for rule of law, he also holds the Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award and the Reconciliation Award. An acclaimed author and two-time recipient of the Alan Paton Award, Sachs is also a patron of the arts, having selected the art for the Constitutional Court.

Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.



Former Constitutional Court judge and anti-Apartheid activist, Albie Sachs, talks to filmmaker Adrian Steirn during a portrait sitting about the meaning of fairness and democracy, as well as his role in ensuring these values. 21 ICONS South Africa is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn 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.

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