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Lebo Mashile announced as Design Indaba 2018 speaker

By Lindsay Samson

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"This piece has been burning a hole in my head for the past five or six years," says Lebogang Mashile about her appearance at Design Indaba 2018, for which she is developing an original theatre piece that interrogates aspects of black feminine identity through the exploration of the experiences of Sarah Baartman.

Lebo Mashile, South African actor, writer and poet.

A Khoi woman who was famously exhibited as freak show attractions in 19th-century Europe, Sarah Baartman's story is one of extreme objectification of the black female body, something Mashile is both nervous and eager to take on.

First speaker for Design Indaba Festival 2018 announced

1 Nov 2017

"Sarah Baartman is a grand ancestor, you know? And I think so many marginalised women on the continent have imagined this story. And it's something that people are going to keep coming back to. It's like the story of Jesus almost! It's a big story," she says, letting out the first of numerous booming chuckles.

Her voice is no one's but hers

For a lot of young South Africans, that laugh, voice and face is a familiar one. Many had grown up watching her presenting television shows on SABC and e.tv, hearing her gentle but powerful voice over advertisements and celebrating her talents when she landed a small role in the 2004 award-winning Hollywood blockbuster, *Hotel Rwanda*.

In fact, in many ways, Mashile's empathetic artistry has made people feel as if she 'belongs' to them. But if Mashile – one of the most anticipated speakers for the 2018 Design Indaba Conference – made it clear that her voice is no one's but hers.

Sunu Gonera announced as speaker at Design Indaba 2018

14 Nov 2017

Exiled in her youth, she spent the bulk of her childhood in Providence, Rhode Island in the United States when her parents relocated during apartheid. They returned to South Africa in 1994 when Mashile was sixteen years old. As a young woman, she found herself grappling with issues of identity in a space both foreign and familiar.

She'd long been a lover of words and stories, burying herself in the pages of books she found in her local library as a sort of refuge. "I fell in love with the world of imagination and my own imagination and with the freedom and safety within it – I could be the weirdo that I am inside of other people's minds and then I could put my own mind on paper."

Storytelling is vital

"When we moved back to South Africa, that became a lifeline for me," she says. "This black book with the red binding, for years these were my journals because they were school books. This was the only place where I was safe, where I could be myself, and say what was really going on and how I really felt."

While she initially thought she wanted to be a lawyer, her discovery of the underground poetry scene in Johannesburg in the early 2000s solidified a turn toward the arts. "I was like, 'Whoa, people take the things they say and they put them out there for the world to hear? Oh my god, what? This is called poetry?' It ignited me in a way that nothing had ignited me. It was like, 'Oh, wow, this is what it feels like to be passionate. This is what it feels like to know your purpose."

Since then, Mashile has spent the past two decades building an impressively versatile career, one that has spanned theatre, film, literature and spoken word poetry. Finding the dichotomy between page and stage to be false, storytelling – in all its forms – is something she considers to be vital and intrinsic to us as human beings. As long as people have been walking on planet earth and making language, she explains, we've been making poems and making songs and figuring out how to describe everything around us.

Poetry is a lifeline

"This [poetry] is a lifeline," she says. "For people who go to a poetry session and you hear someone who says something that resonates with you, those words might be the thing that keep you holding on that day. And that's what creativity does, that's what art does – it injects us with hope, with life, it gives our lives meaning, it gives us purpose, it makes us want to stay in this cruel and f©cked up world."

Though continuously evolving, the content of her work, she remains focussed upon much of what has always and continues to burn within her brain – issues of gender, feminism, identity race, spirituality, politics, movement, travel, and how movement shapes identity. Grappling with these kinds of subjects is what led her to spoken word poetry in the first place.

Mashile says she couldn't have imagined what her career was going to be. "I think the feeling that was burning in my heart was so strong. And I was lucky. I think there's a window in life where you can take that kind of leap of faith."

Early-bird ticket sales now open for Design Indaba Festival 2018

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