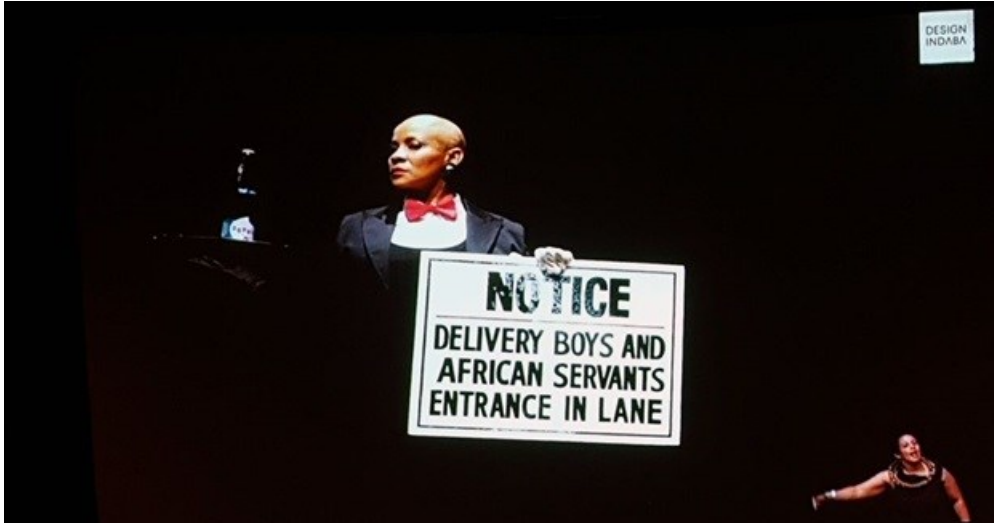


Lebo Mashile on why she keeps coming back to gender and race in her poetry

By  Leigh Andrews

22 Feb 2018

Touching on topics of pop culture and weaving her lyrical way through history, my personal highlight of Design Indaba conference 2018 so far, was unpacking the power of design language with the ultimate lyrical female linguist, Lebo Mashile, who calls herself a Design Indaba disciple and says, "Poetry is the crown jewel of literature."



Mashile on stage at Design Indaba 2018.

Say the name 'Lebo Mashile' and you're sure to be met with a smile of recognition. A welcome addition as one of this year's Design Indaba cohosts, Mashile is a beloved entertainer as well as a social commentator, mother, activist, published author and well-known as a lyrical linguist in her roles as poet and actress.

You may remember her from her role in *Hotel Rwanda* or from her 15-year stint as a former TV presenter – she was at the helm of *L'Attitude*, the anthropological TV show she'd end by reciting a poem inspired by that episode's journey. But she's been off screen for two years now, so you might just recognise her as the voice-over from the female-strong Hyundai Creta 'light the way' ad, launched on international women's day last year.

“ This is for her – the woman whose voice could not be dimmed as we rose from the dark... ”



How Hyundai is driving female brand ambassadorship

Leigh Andrews 11 Apr 2017



Power of the spoken word: Writing her own life story

That's the crux of Mashile at her most resonant and soothing. She's also jarring, unnerving and unforgettable. In addition to having authored two poetry collections – *In a ribbon of rhythm* from 2005, and 2008's *Flying above the sky*, Mashile is working on a third collection and has just released her second studio album, *Moya*.

Described by Michael Bierut as a speaker and performer with a passion for making poetry live in different spaces; making words live in different spaces, Mashile kicked off by taking a picture of the Design Indaba hall, for her 120,000 followers on Twitter.



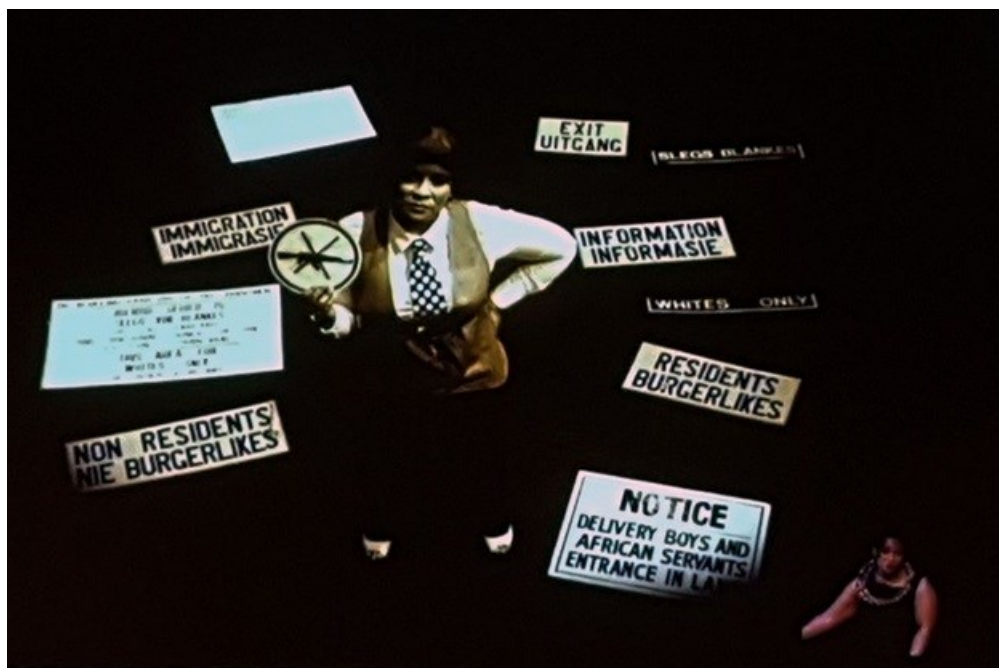
Lebo Mashile announced as Design Indaba 2018 speaker

Lindsay Samson 21 Nov 2017



She's known to many as a South African but was actually born in Rhode Island, USA to Sowetan parents. Describing how their own exile story shaped her current role as storyteller, Mashile shared that her father fled SA in 1968 as a 19-year-old wanting to study engineering and traumatised by the situation he was trying to escape, only to find it was being mirrored in the US at the height of the civil rights movement – **there simply was no solace in 'being black' anywhere.**

In the year 1976, Mashile's mother, a law student part of the Black Consciousness Movement at the time, also left SA and met her father a year later at Robert Sobukwe's funeral in New York. She was born a year later, and her parents' experience as immigrants without a geographically handy support system led to Mashile going through what many South African children go through – she was sent from the US back to SA at the age of just 18 months, on what she dubs her own *groot trek*, where she was shuttled between her paternal and maternal grandparents.



Mashile on stage at Design Indaba 2018.

Mashile explains:

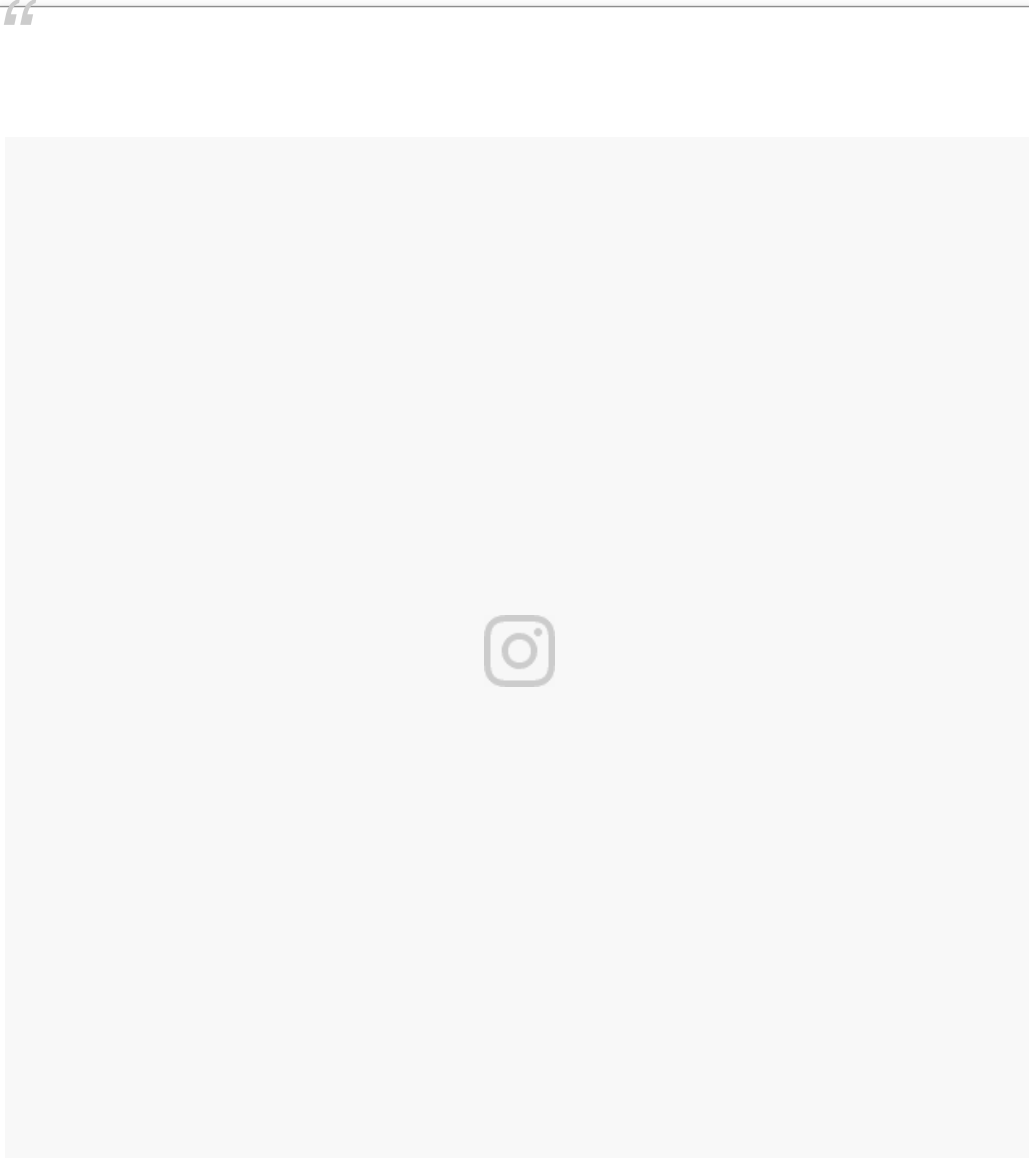
“ My earliest memory is of leaving South Africa, arriving in America, seeing snow for the first time, seeing white people for what felt like the first time, not being able to speak English... so criss-crossing, jumping identities has been the story of my life. ”

At the age of 16, she moved back to South Africa with her family in the early 1990s, at the time of Codesa, the most tumultuous experience of her life as other couples returning from exile broke her family apart. Book and journals that she buried under her bed thus became her lifeline and refuge, her only way to process what was going on.

Rewriting history: Telling the story of Sarah 'Saartjie' Baartman

“ Nobody claps in black families when you announce you want to be an artist... it's like standing up and saying ‘Yes I want to be poor; I want to be a loser’. ”

But she clearly has a gift for language and storytelling, and people love her work. “When I walk into any room, the cleaners, waiters and security guards, your aunties and mamas and the ladies who clean for you – they recognise me as a poet. And that’s why I do it, because of the deep, historical legacy of poetry in this country. It’s a tool to capture culture and, as an art form, there’s a cultural resonance that’s just beyond compare.”



Praise song for men Threads 2008

A post shared by [Lebo Mashile](#) (@lebomashile) on Jul 26, 2013 at 2:04am PDT

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When she travels the world and is asked why she keeps coming back to issues of gender and race, Mashile says she responds, “I’m South African, it’s *pap en vleis* for us. We eat race for breakfast, and elect rapists, and kick them out. I’m trying to work around that.”

“Others may be more prolific than me, but what I do matters at this moment in history, right now it is testament to the current context in SA. This art form seen by some as rarefied, obscured, irrelevant in other corners of the world has given me a voice. It’s pissed off some, but who cares? Why shouldn’t I be a literary reference?” ”



Mashile in theatrical pose.

Why indeed. Mashile then recited a handful of her 'soul sentences' on stage that left the crowd 'shook' and speechless, and ended with a preview of the Pamela Nomvete-directed Saartjie Baartman original theatre performance *Saartjie vs Venus*, which interrogates aspects of black feminine identity. Mashile is performing this in conjunction with the operatic Ann Masina, in its debut performance in conjunction with the Design Indaba Nightscape this evening. She received two standing ovations for her 'talk'.

“Gawd damn just experienced a live performance by [@lebomashile](#) I have never experienced such a powerful experience in my life. Shuuuuuuuuuuu [#DesignIndaba](#)— Sbu (@SbuDaBuddist) [February 22, 2018](#) ”

“So funny.. [@lebomashile](#) tells the audience to stop clapping "you are eating my time.. you are eating my time.. I still have more shit to speak.. Check her out tomorrow night for the depiction of Saartjie Baartmans life it's going to be RIVETING [@designindaba @designindaba](#)— Style Africa (@Style_Africa) [February 22, 2018](#) ”

“Day 2: [#DesignIndaba](#) - Listen! [@lebomashile](#) SHUT IT DOWN with her performance. I didn't even have time to take pictures for that one. [👍👍👍👍👍](#)— Christopher Shayo (@seandayochris) [February 22, 2018](#) ”

Mashile says it's a story ingrained with her consciousness, and describes it as follows: "This piece has been burning a hole in my head for the past five or six years. Where my body tries to break my voice, that's where I find the next poem..."

She explains:

“All the issues Beyoncé has to deal with now, Saartjie had to deal with then... all those body issues! ”

With Mashile at the helm, you know the topic has been dealt with in a way that brings aspects of the black feminine identity of yesteryear to life today. Don't miss the performance set to close out Design Indaba 2018 on Friday, 23 February at 8:15pm at Nightscape. We all need the wise words of Lebo Mashile in our lives.

PS: I also sat down for a video interview with Mashile, watch this space for further insights!

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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