



THUSO MBEDU

– *A Woman
King is Born*



Nolo Phiri

Thuso Mbedu, one of the best actresses to emerge from South Africa, has learned that that storytelling is queen.

Actress Thuso Mbedu (30) is undoubtedly one of South Africa's most exceptional and thriving exports, a generational talent in her own league who has captured the world's attention for her authentic beauty and natural acting abilities. She has an alluring intuition for her craft and an unrivalled ability to communicate an unspoken message.

The KwaZulu-Natal born actress spoke exclusively to *Imbiza* about her life story, her rise to stardom and her guiding life principles. Born and raised in Pietermaritzburg, Mbedu first tasted trauma at the tender age of four when she lost her mother to brain tumour, leading her to be raised by her caring grandmother, Thokozile. Her mother separated from her father before she was even born.

Granny Thokozile did her best to offer Mbedu a normal childhood. Children with a grandmother lack nothing, goes a Kenyan proverb. "There was not a day that my sister and I went to bed hungry. My

grandmother made sure we had clothes and food. She was a mother to us and more. She taught me to be strong and not to feel sorry for myself," Mbedu recalls. "My life wasn't as hard as others, but it certainly wasn't easy."

She met her biological father for the first time when she was 11 and, tragically, he passed away in 2012, adding to Mbedu's list of traumas but, at the same time, shaping her character even more. "Losing my parents taught me to be independent and to be a strong young woman," she says.

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Growing up, she recalls suffering from skin allergies that gave birth to her aspiration of becoming a dermatologist after finishing school, a dream fully supported by her grandmother who had long lived with the pain of not seeing Mbedu's mother realise her wish of becoming a geologist in apartheid South Africa.

Life-defining decision

While at high school Mbedu gravitated towards drama. "The first seed was planted at the age of 16 in grade 10 when I studied drama. I had performed a poem I had written for myself, not with the intention of it being consumed by an audience. The feedback of the audience was amazing. Some came to me teary-eyed and told me how they had felt during my performance. I realised then that great healing can come from a performance and it can be used as a tool for social and positive change."

Mbedu's relationship with God deepened her awareness and connection to her craft, as she started to understand her calling to heal others through performance. "I fell in love with it. I told my grandmother I no longer planned to do anything related to medicine at university anymore; performance is what I'm going to pursue [instead]."

Understandably, her grandmother was not happy with this change of plans but, in the end, she supported her all the way. Since Mbedu was burdened with the responsibility of raising tuition fees for tertiary education herself, she decided to choose a career path she believed she was born to follow.

She attended Wits University in Johannesburg where she graduated with an honours degree in Physical Theatre and Performing Arts Management. In 2012, she attended the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York City for five weeks.

But it had not been smooth sailing. By her third year at university, she struggled with choosing major subjects to get her into the honours class. That's when she submitted to prayer: "God, I need you to tell me what to do because you see far ahead of me, and God revealed to me to pick Physical Theatre because I'd be able to heal people through my body."

The prevailing theme of healing continued to guide Mbedu into her budding professional career as she began attracting television roles from the age of 23. Those roles paved the road to Hollywood. In 2014, Mbedu made her acting debut on the small screen when she played the role of Boni Khumalo on Mzansi Magic's drama series *Saints and Sinners*. The following year she appeared on *Scandal!*, playing

the character of Kitso Medupe. Also, in the same year, she landed a role as Kheti on *Snake Park 2*, a teen drama. In 2016, the acclaimed actress earned a leading role as Winnie Bhengu in the South African teen drama *Is'Thunzi*, a performance that earned her an International Emmy Award nomination, the only African to be nominated that year.

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A shot at Hollywood

While Mbedu was in the US to attend the Emmy ceremony following her nomination, she fortuitously learned about *The Underground Railroad*, a film adaptation of a bestselling novel by Colson Whitehead. She came to learn that Barry Jenkins, the film's director, was casting for a lead in the film. The rest is history. In 2019, Mbedu landed the coveted role as Cora, a woman who desperately escapes the Antebellum South on the Underground Railroad. To prepare for the role, Mbedu learned an awful lot about American slavery, a subject that had not received prominence in her education in South Africa, a country dealing with its own trauma of the past.



Photo: Kyle Kaplan



The next project

Mbedu's next mega project will see her star opposite acclaimed American actress Viola Davis in a film called *The Woman King*, a historical epic inspired by true events that took place in The Kingdom of Dahomey, one of the most powerful African kingdoms that was located within present-day Benin between 1600 and 1904. The story follows Nanisca, a general of the all-female military unit, and Nawi, an ambitious recruit, who together fought enemies who violated their honour, enslaved their people, and threatened to destroy everything they've lived for. Mbedu will play the character of Nawi. The film will be directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood, who directed hits such as *Love and Basketball* (2000), *Disappearing Acts* (2000) and, recently, *The Old Guard* (2020). Doubtless, Mbedu has truly arrived in Hollywood.

When *Imbiza* asked her if she found herself confronting an imposter syndrome by working with revered Hollywood names such as Jenkins and Davis, Mbedu responded: "I worked with the best of the best back home. Coming to America, I had no time for feeling like an imposter being in spaces with all these big names. My very first production in South Africa was with prolific actors like Nthathi Moshesh, Sibulele Gcilitshana, Tumisho Masha, S'dumo Mtshali. I was with the best of the best in SA, and they welcomed me so warmly, they took me in and were willing to teach me, so I never got to a place where I felt like I could ever suffer from doubt that I deserved my roles".

An intense working culture

She explains how audition processes are so rigorous in Hollywood that by the time you finally get cast, one truly believes in their value in what they are there to offer. Mbedu feels privileged to have worked with Jenkins. "In working with Barry from the audition process of *The Underground Railroad*, I had met someone I really regard as simply a great human, outside the titles he carries. He just wears his heart with every project he does, and trusts you to be a part of it meaningfully. When someone like him trusts you, you know you cannot do him a disservice," Mbedu says.

The intense collaborative process of rehearsals and reading of material consistently stretched her ability as an actor to be able to sustain a complex character such as Cora for 10 months. This was not going to be luck, it was preparation exploiting its opportunity, leaving no space for ego to paralyze and sabotage her greatness.

There is no denying that the rising star, who turns 30 this year and who no doubt has an incredible career ahead of her, has scaled dizzying heights of success

at a young age that most actors dream of their whole lifetime. She continues to meditate on the power of attracting the kind of working environments that continue to challenge her but make her feel safe to be an artist and encourage her passion for storytelling.

Davis, an Academy Award-winning actress, is in awe of Mbedu's talent. In an interview with US-magazine *Deadline*, Davis had this to say about Mbedu: "The depth and complexity of emotional life, her authentic beauty, and regalness is potent."

Prince-Bythewood can't wait to work with the South African star. "Thuso is a generational talent. Her craft, her work ethic, her depth, her passion inspired us all and I cannot wait to play. She is a warrior."

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A glance back home

Asked about her perspective on South Africa's television industry, now that she's experiencing it from outside, the gracious actress beamed with hope and cited the bubbling potential the industry has to offer. "We have incredible talent at home, both in front and behind the camera. We're just trailing behind with enough opportunities. But the world is becoming smaller with the digital space; people have access to our content. In fact, they are hungry for it. It's about being ready to ascend to our throne."

There's so much to learn about Mbedu's life and career, drawing from the Buddhist saying, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." It's a key concept to meditate on, understanding and trusting the power of timing and the will to put in the work. Mbedu continues to show us that "your dreams are valid", coming a long way in her acting career.

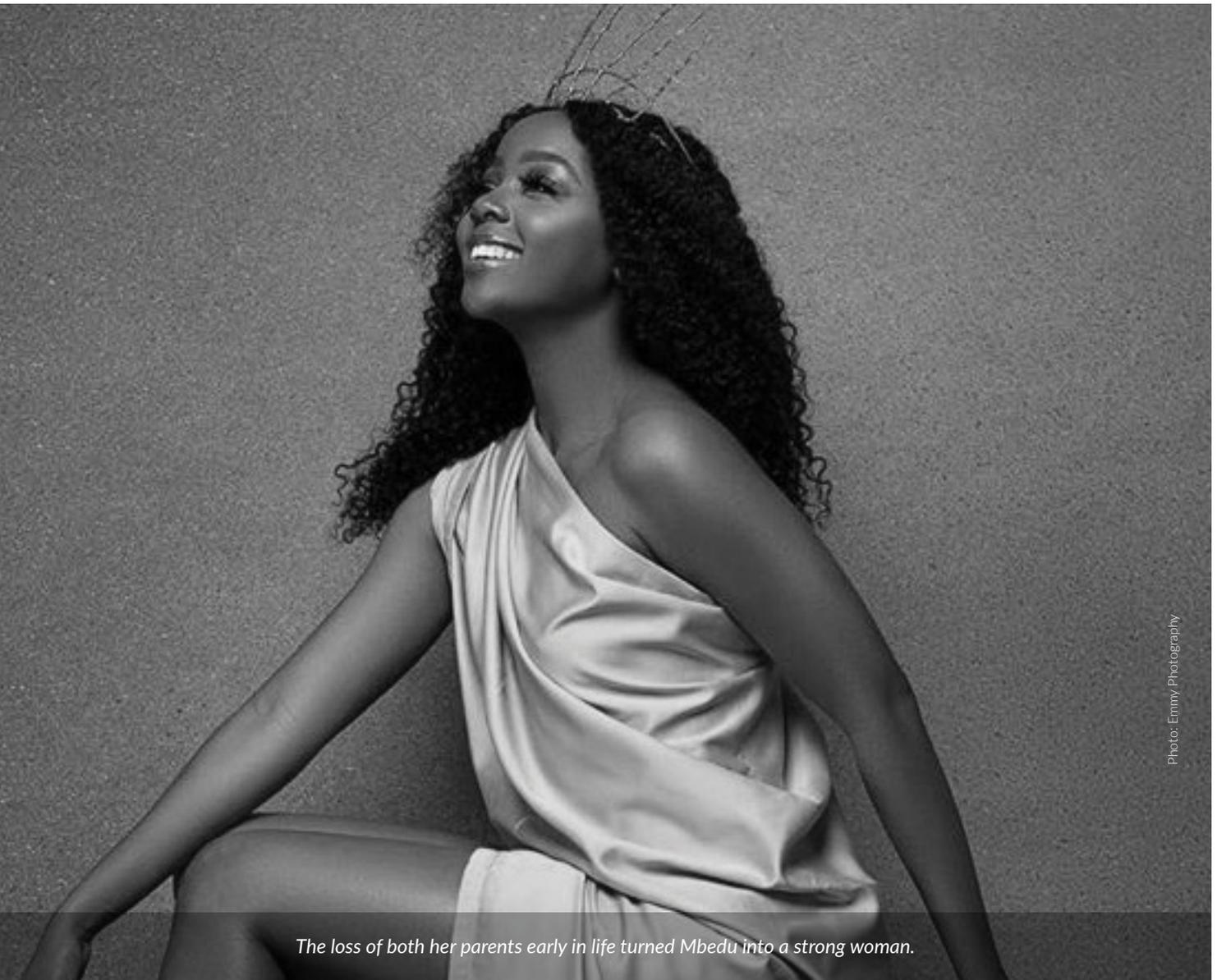


Photo: Emmy Photography

The loss of both her parents early in life turned Mbedu into a strong woman.

The story of Thuso Mbedu is one of strength and triumph. It is about a young girl who once dreamt of a life-altering moment to sit across the table and meet the best version of herself. She passionately and vividly envisioned this in her dreams. One day she woke up, and realised the power of the pictures in her dreams. Driven not only by her deep pursuit of wanting to heal the world around her through her gift, she possessed the vision and knowledge of the responsibility she was called for to empower and inspire her generation with the revelation of what great possibilities look like. "I have never allowed myself to be in that moment of, 'Oh! I'm in the limelight now. How do I alter this or that?' No, it's always been focusing on what matters, and that's preparing yourself to be the best version of yourself for when the opportunity comes to you," Mbedu says.

Mbedu has learned that storytelling is queen! It teaches. It affects. It empowers, and this queen is only in the genesis of a long successful career ahead. A woman king is born!

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Nolo Phiri holds an honours degree from the Wits School of the Arts. She is a television producer, actress, digital content creator and entrepreneur within the creative industries.