



FIRST LADY *of* Comedy

Despite facing hardships that threatened to keep her down, comedian Tumi Morake is best known for her no-holds-barred attitude and funny outlook on life. In her memoir, *And Then Mama Said*, she tackles the pivotal moments in her life.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

Even though more and more women are headlining stand-up shows, the hard fact is female comedians don't have it easy. To thrive in such a cutthroat, male-dominated industry, you have to be tough – *and* über-talented. Which is why it's no great shock that Tumi Morake has been dubbed South Africa's First Lady of Comedy.

Since starting her career on the club scene in 2006, Tumi has done stand-up, acting and presenting on both radio and TV. She was the first woman to host *Comedy Central Presents* in Africa and is the first African woman to have a comedy set featured on Netflix.

Now Tumi has taken all her hardships and accomplishments and put them on paper in her memoir, *And Then Mama Said*. 'I had always wanted to write a book about my mom, Tebogo, but I also wanted to write a book about my own experiences,' she says.

Dedicated to her mother, the memoir recalls some of the most important and difficult moments of Tumi's life. Her mother passed away in 2011, but her voice lives on in Tumi's memory. 'My mother was very outspoken and very loving. She carried her struggles like armour and she fought as far as she could.'

There are many moments in the book that will give readers pause: some painful, some funny and others a little scandalous. 'I didn't do this for the shock factor,' says Tumi. 'I wanted to share my truth and show my fans how I dealt with these things.'

Even so, she did later worry that perhaps she had overshared.

'But the deaths of Jabulani Tsambo, better known as HHP, and Shoki Mokgapa, two young

people who took their own lives, affirmed why I wrote this book,' she says. 'I was in such a dark space and I didn't get through all of this by myself, nor do I ever claim to. I want people to know that it's time for all of us to reach out our arms and either catch or be caught.'

Tumi credits the strong women in her life – her mother, grandmother and aunts – for her own resilience. 'They were so audacious, and I truly believe that I got so much of my personality from them.'

Her mother suffered from

'I could have been just that clown who told jokes, but I chose the tougher route; I chose the truth.'

depression, and when she didn't think she could even go to work, Tumi remembers her saying, 'I chose this job myself', words that helped her keep going. It's a lesson Tumi still holds on to today. 'When times were so dark that I couldn't see where I was going, it reminded me to stop and take a moment to remember why I do what I do.'

One such moment occurred back in 2017, an incident dubbed #Tumigate online. At the time, Tumi was flying high: her talk show, #WTF*Tumi*, had premiered and she was co-hosting a breakfast show on Jacaranda FM. But during a discussion on Jacaranda FM about Steve Hofmeyr, Tumi cracked a joke comparing apartheid to a bully taking away a child's bicycle and then, instead of being

punished, the bully gets to share the bike again.

She was called a racist by white listeners, became the target of hate mail, was cyberbullied and even had to go in front of the Broadcasting Complaints Commission – which ultimately found her innocent of hate speech. In the end, though, Tumi decided to leave the show.

'I miss my co-hosts and I miss radio,' she reflects. 'However, it taught me that as much as we want to move past race and be a rainbow nation, we still need to deal with our underlying problems.'

#Tumigate wasn't her only obstacle. She was also the target of body shaming on the set of *Our Perfect Wedding*, an issue she tackles in the book. 'I'm doing well and I'm happy, but it is an industry with its own demons and you need to be prepared for them,' she says.

Now Tumi shares her life with writer, actor and director Mpho Osei-Tutu and their three children. For many on the outside, Tumi and Mpho seem like the perfect couple. Their relationship is stronger than ever, but Tumi shares in her book that there was a time she didn't think they would make it. 'It was important for me to show people the real Tumi and Mpho,' she says. 'It's tragic to see how many women and men are putting themselves under so much pressure for an impossible ideal. Mpho and I, we make up for each other's weaknesses, and we back each other's strengths.'

Some parts of her memoir dredged up memories she would sooner have left in the past, but Tumi felt they were important to acknowledge. 'Some of the hardest moments were writing about being raped at age 15 by someone I had liked – and writing

about my sister-in-law, Nana Yaa, who we lost suddenly in 2012,' she says. 'I felt like I couldn't even stay there too long. But it was important not to just let my experiences stay with me, because there might be someone I could save with my story. I could have been just that clown who told jokes, but I chose the tougher route; I chose the truth.

'What I hope people take away from the book is that you need to survive, at all costs,' she says.

- Catch Tumi on #WTF*Tumi* on SABC3 and Netflix's *Comedians of the World*, where she'll be one of 32 international comedians to feature in a series of specials.

The biggest lessons we learnt from *And Then Mama Said...*

'*Ke na le kamore ko ga Mma*'

('I have a room at my mother's house') Whenever Tumi's mother faced challenges or felt that she had been painted into a corner, she would say '*Ke na le kamore ko ga Mma*' – as long as she had a home, she would survive.

'Have the confidence of a cockroach'

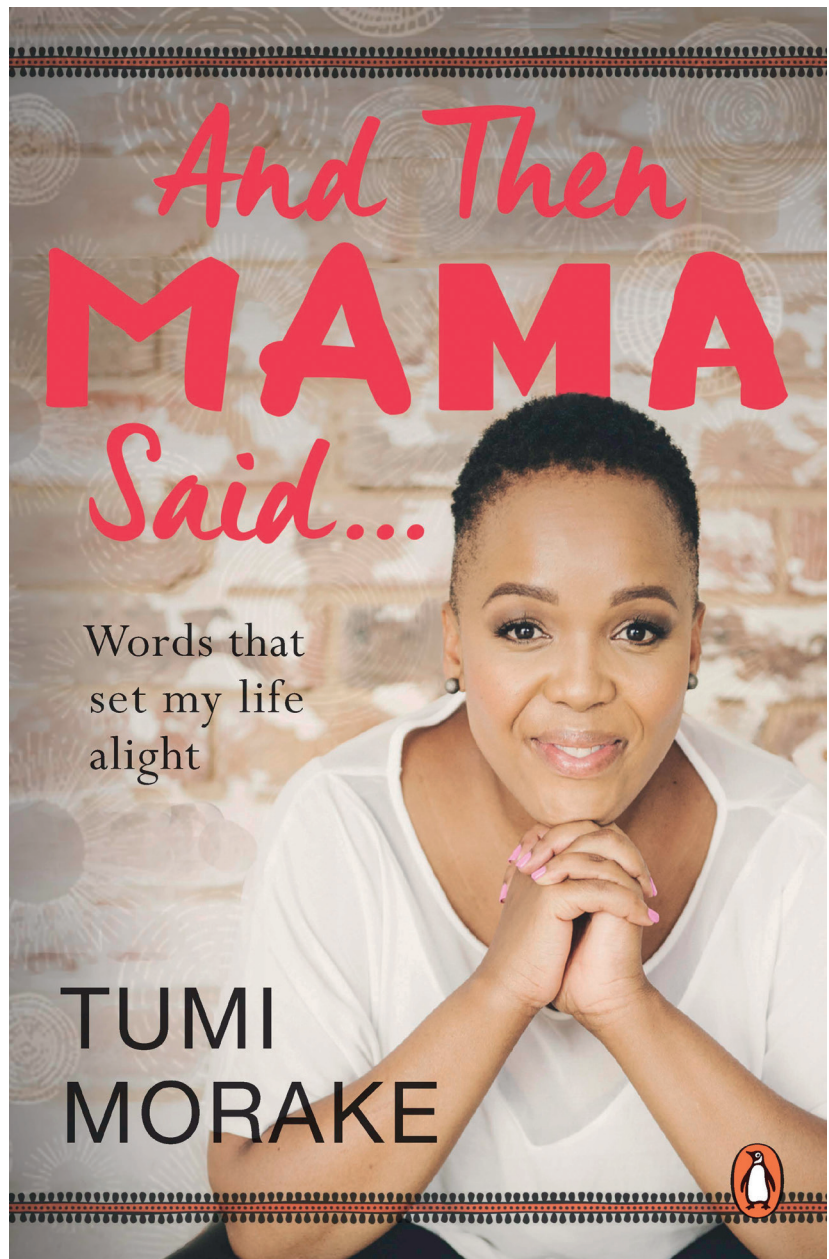
Tumi would often hear this from her mother while growing up: a cockroach doesn't belong in your house or on your table, but there it is, creeping along, in no real rush to get out of your way.

'I can live on bread and water'

This was something Tumi's mother would say to her and her younger sister Vonani: that she would happily live on bread and water as long as they were educated.

'*'n Boer maak 'n plan*'

Her mother believed that no situation was hopeless until you ran out of ideas, and would often say to her '*'n boer maak 'n plan*'. Tumi took this to heart: years after being kicked out of Wits University (she was unable to pay her tuition fees) she went back, finished her degree and got her BA Honours in Dramatic Arts.



AND THEN
MAMA SAID ...

Tumi Morake

PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE (about R220)

WE CAN LIVE ON
BREAD AND WATER