



Siphokazi Mpofu and her Ukwanda colleague Noxolo Blandile with the Charlotte Maxeke puppet for the puppetry and object theatre production MAXEKE

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OUTSIDE *the* 9-TO-5

From a pet psychic to a human lie detector, these four women have eschewed traditional careers to pursue unusual interests.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

String theory

Siphokazi Mpofu describes what she does as bringing objects to life on the stage. 'I remember watching my first puppet show at 19,' she says. 'There was a magic that came off the puppet, the way it woke up. I was amazed.'

Born in Banzi Poort, a village in Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape, Siphokazi moved to Cape Town in search of an education. While in college, she had a friend who was with Unima SA, an art and social development organisation focused on the art of puppetry, and she would tag along to events and rehearsals. He encouraged her to audition. 'I received a call-back and got a part in a children's production working with Muppet puppets.'

While at Unima, Siphokazi was lucky enough to get a coveted spot interning for The Handspring Puppet Company. She graduated from Muppets to bunraku – traditional Japanese puppet theatre. 'From only having to worry about the mouth, I now needed to learn to manipulate the head, eyes, hands...'

This is where she met Luyanda Nogodlwana, Ncedile Daki and Siphon Ngxola, with whom she would create the Ukwanda Puppets & Design Art Collective.

'In 2014, Handspring told us they were closing down the company in South Africa. They encouraged us to start our own puppet company, which they would support.'

Handspring supports them to this day, as does the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape.

Ukwanda's first show, *Qhawe: A Xhosa Fairytale*, debuted at the 2015 Grahamstown Arts Festival, and they won the Standard Bank Encore Ovation Award. They've since lost Ncedile, who died in a hijacking, but the group is keeping his memory alive with the work they do.

Asking Siphokazi to choose her favourite puppet is like asking a mother which of her children she loves the most; they are all special. 'While I'm making and bringing them to life, they become my favourite.' But she does single

out one puppet that holds a special place in her heart: Worona is a young girl who, at 14, is introduced to drugs. She has dreams of getting her mother out of the township, moving to Constantia and graduating. But everything is taken away from her because of drugs. Siphokazi's most prized possession is a piece of her and Worona by artist Iona Gilbert.

'Our art form is often overlooked,' Siphokazi says. 'People don't realise how much work goes into what we do.' Unlike traditional actors, puppeteers often have to do double the work. 'You need to perform in your body what your puppet is going to do, and then manipulate the puppet to do that. You need to transfer every emotion to the puppet.'

When theatre-goers watch a play with puppets, they're aware that the 'dolls' aren't real, but for them to empathise with the characters the puppets need to come to life on the stage. 'People see themselves in these stories,' Siphokazi says.

She takes pride in having this rare skill, and she loves teaching it to others.



Claire Fitzgerald asks pups Harry and Guinness who's really in charge (spoiler: Mom!) and Jack (opposite) does tricks for the camera.

Look who's talking

Like most pet owners, I often look at my cats and wonder what they'd say if they could talk. That's just a normal day for pet communicator Claire Fitzgerald. She can speak to animals – and they speak back to her.

'I describe animal communication as a heart-to-heart connection,' Claire says. 'So if you come from a place of love and are open, and the animal agrees (because we have to have consent), there can be a free flow of information.'

Claire has always loved animals and felt that she had a special affinity for them, but it was only when she met her mentor Diane Budd that she was able to see things from the animal's point of view.

'I'd been having issues with my horse Jack, which I've known since I was 14,' she says. She credits Jack with helping her become the person she is today. So, when he didn't seem like himself, she put aside her scepticism and reached out to Diane. The things Diane told her just blew her away. 'I took one of her workshops and ended up quitting my master's in mining sustainability to pursue animal communication.'

Today, Claire works full-time helping people speak to their pets, both alive and dead, and hosts workshops to teach others to do it too. Though Claire says that children pick it up more easily, she says anyone can learn to talk to their pets.

'I really believe our natural state is being one with animals,' she says. 'Many years ago, we lived in harmony with animals, but over time, we lost that ability.' She explains that the workshops aren't



as much about learning as they are about reawakening that lost sense.

Claire has communicated with sharks and the matriarch of an elephant herd. 'It's always interesting to experience a new species that I know nothing about and then get to experience how they perceive the world.'

So, are cats and dogs as different as we think? 'Every animal has their own personality, but dogs are often more entertaining, while cats can be elusive. But I've met dogs and cats where the opposite was true.'

Fish and lizards are more primal in their communication – focusing on reproduction, eating, sleeping. And birds, she says, are very bossy. The most common request from pets? Food, naturally. 'But also spending more time with their guardians.'

Claire says there isn't anything special about her – it's a skill that

we can all learn. Her goal is to empower everyone to communicate with their animals. 'We're like radio towers, broadcasting our thoughts all the time, and animals can pick up those thoughts. It is just that we struggle to listen.' If you want to be more open, Claire suggests the following:

- Animals pick up on your emotional wellbeing, so when you're stressed they can sense that worry. So, first, you need to be as calm and balanced as you can be around them.
- When you talk to them, use positive language. For example, if you are telling your pet not to bark, avoid saying 'don't' – instead tell them they are so good when they are quiet.
- They understand everything you say, so don't make them promises you don't plan to keep.
- Our pets often put messages and thoughts into our heads, and we don't realise it's coming from them. So don't doubt what you're getting.

Lizette Volkwyn is one of two certified Paul Ekman Institute (PEI) human lie detectors in South Africa.



Big little lies

You don't want Lizette Volkwyn at your poker table. As one of only two certified human lie detectors in South Africa, Lizette can spot a bluff from a mile away.

After 25 years in the corporate world, specialising in IT and office automation, she left it all behind. 'I wanted to empower people,' she says. In 2012, she qualified as a master life coach and neuro-linguistic programmer. Yet, still, there was something missing.

'I was battling to get to the core of my clients,' she says. People aren't always honest, even when it's in their best interest to be – just ask any doctor. 'I figured if I could learn how to spot the lie sooner, I could get down to the core of a person and help them find the right path.'

One year into her career change, Lizette enrolled with the Paul Ekman Group in Manchester and underwent rigorous training to become a human lie detector. With her on the course were 29 candidates from 27 countries, 24 of whom

were from intelligence agencies. 'It's still a very new science. Dr Paul Ekman started his research in 1958, but it's only been in the past 15 to 20 years that we've actually started applying it.'

So, how does Lizette spot a lie? 'When you lie, your subconscious mind has 20-plus different "tells" that you have no control over. No matter how hard you try, you can't hide them.' Though she cautions that one tell doesn't prove a lie, she says she can spot an untruth by listening to someone's tone of voice, the grammar they use, and their posture, body language and even feet placement. But the nonverbal behaviour that most effectively shows whether a person is being dishonest is called micro-expressions: brief, involuntary facial expressions that reveal a person's true emotions. 'Universal micro-expressions – like happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, contempt and fear – happen in one-25th of a second on your face, so most people don't see them – but if you are trained to spot them, they can provide invaluable insights into someone's true feelings.'

Lizette's focus is on corporate clients, teaching them to master the truth and communicate more effectively, but she does occasionally work with detectives or companies rooting out white-collar crime.

Lizette promises that, if you met her at a party, she wouldn't put you on the spot for telling a white lie. 'Just like a doctor isn't diagnosing people 24/7, I'm not constantly looking for lies, although sometimes I can't help but notice them. We call it a hot tell – I can't miss it! But I won't call you out on it.'

If you're looking to become a better communicator through lie detection, register for her workshop 'I Can See You Lie' on 2 and 3 June in Centurion, and then in Cape Town in September. Visit faceoffptyltd.howler.co.za/IcanseeyouLIE to find out more.



Widaad Albertus with David Kramer and Jenny Stead in the rehearsal space for David's latest production, *Ver Innie Wêreld Kittie*, for which she's the costume designer

Set dressing

Widaad Albertus is in the middle of a fitting for the David Kramer musical *Ver Innie Wêreld Kittie*. There's a lot on the go; I try to catch her between dressing actors.

After school, Widaad decided to study textile and surface design. She loved drama but never thought she could make a career out of it. 'My older sister was studying drama at the time, and I lurked around her a lot. I really fell in love with theatre, and that's how I found myself working at The Fugard Theatre.'

She was working part-time as an usher while studying when a production manager said they were looking for someone who knew costumes. 'I raised my hand and said, "I can sew!" They took me backstage and introduced me to costume designer Penny Simpson, who took me under her wing.'

Widaad went on to be mentored by Birrie le Roux, the renowned film and theatre costume designer, until she was ready to go on her own. 'My first few shows I designed solo, I called Birrie to ask her advice.' She worked on any show she could and soon became a permanent fixture at The Fugard, running its wardrobe department. She worked on *Kinky Boots*, *West Side Story*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, *The Demon Bride*, *Shakespeare in Love*... the list goes on.

Every day offers a new and exciting challenge. Widaad remembers that, in *Rocky*, Frank-N-Furter Brendan van Rhyn's corsets broke all the time. 'There was one time I was hiding behind him trying to retie his corset while he was on stage in front of an audience.' Sourcing costumes for their production of *Shakespeare in*

Love took her to the UK – to the Royal Shakespeare Company and Angels, the oldest costume house in the world.

Widaad was pondering where she wanted to go as a designer when Covid hit and The Fugard shut its doors for good (RIP). 'It was heart-breaking. The Fugard was my second home.' But she had little time to feel sorry for herself. Producer and director Jaco Nothnagel gave her a shot at set props buying. 'That's when I found my love of set design.'

Widaad has just finished the production design on four films for kykNET. But the theatre will always be her first love. 'There's nothing like the thrill of a live audience; I am so happy to be back at it. I'm sweating, I haven't eaten, my feet are swollen, but I love it!'

This is the first time she has been in a rehearsal space in a while. Before this, she worked with Michael Mitchell on *Sara Baartman – The Opera* last year.

'When you start hearing them sing, saying their lines, it feeds into your designs. It's not just "form follows function" for me, which is one of the biggest rules of design; it has a lot to do with feeling.' ❖

PHOTOGRAPHS: LIZA VAN DEVENTER; ALET PRETORIUS