

Durban's Patron Saint of the Performing Arts

Peter Machen pays tribute to the late Alfred Nokwe, whose life and work will be celebrated at the Heritage Awards at the ICC on 19 September

This year the Heritage Art Awards will be honouring screen and stage legend, the late Alfred Nokwe. Nokwe, who died in June last year at the age of 73, was one of Durban's most beloved performing talents. Both in life and in the wake of his death, he was a kind of patron saint of the performing arts, providing strength and encouragement against the dark forces of apartheid and its legacy. A talented actor and a singer, Nokwe had a profound impact on South Africa's creative scene, helping to deliver such talents as Leleti Khumalo, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and fellow heritage awardee Bheki Mseleku to the world. Born in 1935 in Port St Johns in what was then the Transkei, Nokwe arrived in Durban at the age of five with his mother. They lived in Umkhumbane or Cato Manor, or as it is also called, and the vibrant spirit of the area came to infuse Nokwe's life and provide an important touchstone in his career.

Nokwe started his working life as a municipal clerk and secretary of the Beatrice Street YMCA and was later appointed district sales manager for SA Breweries, before taking on the entertainment industry. His first professional appearance was in Malcolm Woolfson's production of Alan Paton's *Mkhumbane*. It was Paton who had introduced Nokwe to the stage and the connection between the two men would endure all of Nokwe's life. In 2005, a few years before his death, he rewrote Paton's work as *Uvukile Umkhumbane (Cato Manor Has Arisen)*, celebrating the resilience and determination that he found in one of Durban's most famous and complex spaces. Nokwe went on to appear in a range of theatrical productions, televised drama series and films. Notable appearances include *Cry the Beloved Country* – based on another Paton work – and the TV mini-series of *Shaka Zulu*.

Nokwe's experience as an orphan – he never knew his father and his mother died when he was 14 – made him an extremely generous and hospitable person and the KwaMashu house that he shared with his wife Patti – also an acclaimed and gifted singer and actress – was a legendary place of refuge for many visiting actors and musicians, with Alfred rehearsing with musicians on his piano the whole night through.

Although Nokwe was multi talented as an actor, singer and musicians (his bands included Brass Band, Percussions, and the Rockets), his central passion was the nurturing and encouragement of young talent from the townships around Durban. Those that have benefited from the encouragement provided by Nokwe and his family's Amajika Arts Institution include the likes of gospel singer Deborah Fraser and actress Leleti Khumalo. Other stars whose early careers were fueled by Nokwe's nurturing generosity include performance powerhouse Mbongeni Ngema and jazz genius Bheki Mseleku. As a band manager, Nokwe also looked after Juluka for a year and was also responsible for getting Ladysmith Black Mambazo on the BBC television show where Paul Simon first heard them. And of course, it would have been unthinkable for some of the Nokwe children not to grow up as performers; Nokwe's daughters Tu and Marilyn are both talented singers, while his son Papi, who died in 2005, was a gifted songwriter and talented multi-instrumentalist.

It's tempting to think that had he grown up under more favourable conditions, without the imposing limits of apartheid, Nokwe would no doubt have scaled even greater heights. But such thoughts are sacrilege in a way; we have only this reality and one of the paradoxes of apartheid lies in the enormous cultural riches produced in response to its inhumanity. Without Nokwe these riches would not be as abundant.

The final words on Alfred Nokwe belong to his daughter Tu: "His wisdom was so amazing. He taught us truth, to live our lives as truthfully as possible."

☒ The Heritage Awards is a high-profile annual event which sees six phenomenal South Africans honoured for their contribution towards the preservation and promotion of South African heritage and culture. The other five awardees are Nanda Soobben, Johnny Clegg, Noria Mabasa, Jay Pather and Bheki Mseleku. The awards ceremony takes place on Saturday 19 September at 7pm at the ICC Durban at a glittering function. To book contact Sheeka at sheeka@kizo.co.za or on 031 566 4324.