

## CITATION FOR GCINA MHLOPHE: HONORARY GRADUAND

11 APRIL 2014 By Professor Paul Maylam

“For as long as there have been people in the world there have been stories – long before all the great sciences were known to us. Stories pass on wisdom gathered through the ages – truths that stand their ground, enrich our lives and give us guidance”. These the words of this afternoon’s honorary graduand, Gcina Mhlophe, herself one of South Africa’s foremost storytellers – a most versatile artist and performer who tells her stories in four different languages – isiZulu, isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans – stories which in turn have been translated into German, French, Italian, Swahili and Japanese; stories which are spoken, written, performed; stories which blend together folklore, information, current affairs, song and idiom; stories about magic, about apartheid oppression, about arranged marriages, about a queen tortoise, or a snake with seven heads, or a singing dog, even a story about a toilet.

This gift for storytelling came in large part from her grandmother who brought her up in Durban. “My grandmother taught me everything about telling stories”, says Gcina. Neighbourhood children would visit and be enthralled by her grandmother’s *izinganekwane* – her tales of Africa. Gcina is saddened that this tradition of grandmother storytelling is dying out, and being replaced by granny Google.

Inspired by her grandmother she began sharing stories with her school friends, and then with the children in a home where she had her first job as a domestic worker. In one family there were four children who would come home and trash the rooms she had cleaned – so she started telling them her grandmother’s stories, and the trashing stopped. This an important formative phase in her life, giving her the belief that she could build a career as a storyteller.

Further years of apprenticeship lay ahead – a cadet journalism course here at Rhodes; writing for the *Learn and Teach Magazine*; part-time newsreading for BBC radio's Africa service. Then an acting career seemed to be on the cards in the 1980s – parts in plays that toured South Africa, before becoming the first female director at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, working with Barney Simon, who she considers to have been one of her greatest mentors.

In time Gcina turned her back on this thriving stage career. While in Chicago in 1988 her storytelling took off, performing there to popular acclaim. Other mentors encouraged her to pursue this artistic medium.

And so emerged this multifaceted performer – storyteller, poet, playwright, actor, dancer, writer of stories, one who works with musicians, and who can be seen in film and on tv –collaborating with Ladysmith Black Mambazo in making a CD for children, or working with the London Philharmonic Orchestra; producing work for children, while also in demand to perform at business conferences and seminars, gifted with the ability to create stories that complement business themes and interests. For Gcina Mhlophe storytelling is the information technology of yesteryear.

Our honorary graduand is not just a performer, but also an ardent campaigner for the cause of literacy, especially in South Africa's marginalised rural areas: serving as executive director of the Gcinamasiko Arts and Heritage Trust that promotes African writers and the heritage of storytelling in schools. In 2001 initiating the Nozincwadi Mother of Books Literacy Campaign, which is still operating and has involved Gcina in travelling to rural schools for storytelling performances, taking with her books to set up school libraries. Currently serving, too, as the patron of the South African branch of the International Association for Theatre for Children and Young People.

From late last year to January this year black and white photographs of twenty-one South African heroes were shared as collectable posters in the *Sunday Times*, week after week, under the title '21 Icons'. The twenty-first icon, but certainly not the least, was Gcina Mhlophe, portrayed in the photograph carrying books on her head – just one of many accolades bestowed upon her. Today she is receiving her sixth honorary doctorate, with further recognition having come in the form of the Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival; Chicago's Joseph Jefferson Award for acting; the Sony Award for Radio Drama from BBC Radio Africa; a lifetime achievement award for her contribution to traditional arts; an Ethekewini Living Legends Award, and more.

Rhodes University is now proud to honour one of South Africa's most versatile performers – actor and activist, poet and playwright, storyteller, director, author, philanthropist – who has been described as a 'custodian of stories', and as an 'ambassador for literacy' – who is driven by an irrepressible spirit and a deep love for storytelling. Able to use her whole self – body, mind and spirit – in her performances, able to speak to children, to business people, to the ordinary person in the street, she has captivated audiences across the world for over two decades.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Gcina Mhlophe the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.