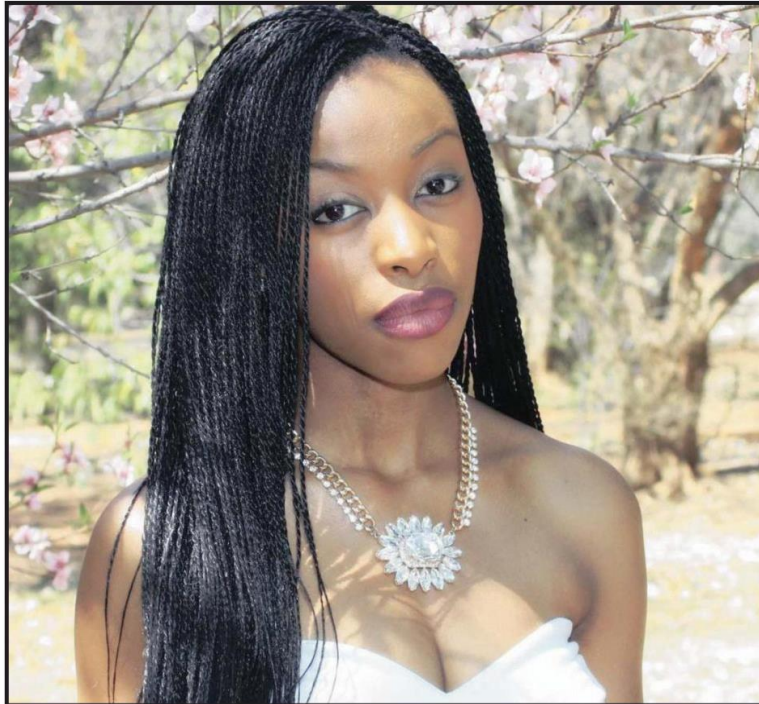


Drama series that speaks to the Soul of a nation. . .

Soul City has been a trailblazing series for SABC1 since South Africa's independence 20 years ago. With storylines that champion issues plaguing society, the drama has debunked myriad misconceptions and provided insight into taboo matters. **Debashine Thangevelo** caught up with veteran actress Lillian Dube and newcomer Nunu Khumalo to chat about the upcoming 12th season...



LIFE LESSONS: Newcomer Nunu Khumalo, above, and veteran actress Lillian Dube, below right, chat about their respective characters in the 12th season of SABC1's *Soul City*. PICTURES: ©SABC1 PUBLICITY AND LOUISE CARMICHEAL

LILLIAN DUBE

A HOUSEHOLD name in South Africa, Lillian Dube has been entertaining viewers since the 1980s. While she has years of experience—especially in comedy—there is no escaping the clout she wielded as Sister Bettina Khumalo on SABC1's drama, *Soul City*.

A no-nonsense character, Bettina has been a beacon of hope for the patients of Soul City.

Interestingly, during her time with the drama, Dube found herself enlightened on two issues that were very close to home: cancer and depression.

She asks: "Remember when Sister Bettina suffered from cancer?"

And then continues: "You know how directors are; they want all the emotions, which I did as the character. The irony was that when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I couldn't cry. In real life, I was afraid. "But it was through *Soul City* that I discovered my own lump."

On her character going through depression, she shares: "In real life, I used to have terrible depression. Because of *Soul City*, I was able to deal with it. Through that I got introduced to Sadag (The South African Depression and Anxiety Group)."

Interestingly enough, she also bagged an award for her moving performance.

The actress recalls: "When the director was directing those scenes with Sister Bettina, you could almost hear a pin drop. That's how quiet it was. Because I was a sufferer, I knew

depressed, you are in this bottomless dark hole."

The subject of the late Robin Williams came up and she immediately identified with what he probably went through despite the happy façade. After all, she paradoxically established a huge following after doing comedy for what seems like an eternity in TV.

Soul City is renowned for raising pertinent issues, from HIV/Aids to abuse and infidelity. And many of the themes affecting communities throughout South Africa are borne out of actual research conducted by the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication (SC IHDC).

Explaining the influence the series has had, Dube recalls: "One day, a gentleman approached me at the bank and said: 'You know, Mama Lillian, the first time I realised I was abusing my wife was when I watched that *Soul City* episode'. And he stopped after that. That storyline also taught women to love themselves. You know, most women, when their husbands are abusive, they always make excuses."

As for why her character has left an indelible impression on viewers, Dube notes: "She has always been a mother figure. Someone who has good advice. She is firm, yet gentle at the same time. And caring."

On inhabiting this character for several years, she offers: "Now that she is older, she is even wiser. Her main passion is to educate the young nurses about making it about people first. Never mind about protocol, sometimes you have to use common

Forms can be filled out later. And it's also about educating the caregivers."

So what's on the cards for this 13-part season?

She laughs: "I'm not sure whether art imitates life or the other way around, but we discuss the shortage of water. We are dealing with E.coli and how to prevent it."

As for working with newcomer Nunu Khumalo, she praises: "I love working with young children. They bring a freshness. What I really loved seeing is them being educated by what we do. You know, even though I have been acting for a long time, I still learn a lot, too."

While her heart will always belong to comedy, she maintains, "*Soul City* is one of my favourites".

Fans can also catch her in SABC1's comedy, *The Perfect Family*. In fact, she had to quickly wrap up our chat as she was called back on set to finish her scenes.

Once again, she is revelling in her role—this time as an overbearing granny. Think along the lines of Ruth Cele from *Suburban Bliss*.

NUNU KHUMALO

THIS newcomer is fast ingratiating herself with viewers. She attracted attention as Nhlanhla in *Laxion Lyric* before bagging the role of Cindy in Mzansi Magic's *Isibaya*.

Now she has been thrust into the spotlight as one of the main protagonists in this season of *Soul City*.

Playing the role of Relebogile (aka RiRi), her character speaks

it's not just a drama series. It's part of the culture we had since independence. It's about people who have grown up watching it and Sister Bettina. I had to properly measure how much weight was in this character. It was my first lead role. I had to prepare."

And she did when she got the script about three weeks before shooting.

Khumalo continues: "I'm a Siswati girl and RiRi is Zulu-speaking. So I had to work on my Zulu. I wanted it to sound natural. I used method acting and a lot of emotional memory."

Peeling back the layers of her character, she offers: "RiRi is suffering some misunderstanding among the people she has to be around. The relationship with her mother is strained. She has a lot of disagreements with her partner. They come from very different backgrounds and clash over the way they work and their attitude towards treating people. She is living in a contrasting world. She has never struggled in her life. Everything that she wanted, she had. Here she is working in an environment where people don't have money. They didn't grow up like her. She has to learn that she is not there to judge them."

On working alongside an inimitable actress like Dube, she shares: "It's been amazing. She really made it a point to give me advice and talked to me after I had really emotional scenes. I'm not at that level where I can shoot and just walk away. It stays with me. She advised me to explore different women going forward."

Khumalo reveals: "Compassion is the biggest lesson that RiRi learns."

Although there is a possible new show on the cards for her, it was too early to chat about. Right now, she just wants to do it all!

The vivacious actress says: "I love work and I live to tell stories."

She couldn't ask for a better platform than *Soul City* to fulfil the latter part of her goal.

● *Soul City* season 12 airs on SABC1 from next Tuesday at 8.30pm.

