

PROGRAM DATE: 2018-03-01

PROGRAM NAME: WOMANITY – WOMEN IN UNITY

GUEST NAME: NONDUMISO TEMBE – AWARD WINNING ACTRESS, SINGER AND SONGWRITER (PART ONE)

SPEAKER	TRANSCRIPTION
DR. MALKA	Hello, I'm Dr. Amaleya Goneos-Malka, welcome to 'Womanity – Women in Unity'. The show that celebrates prominent and ordinary African Women's milestone achievements in their struggles for liberation, self-emancipation, human rights, democracy, racism, socio-economic class division and gender based violence.
DR. MALKA	Joining us on the line today from Durban is Nondumiso Tembe who is a multi-award winning actress, singer and songwriter. Her acting credits stretch from South Africa to the USA with roles in SABC's Generations; HBO's Golden Globe and Emmy Award winning True Blood; the is History Channel's military drama Six; her recent film work includes Zulu Wedding and she has just had a run in theatre with King Kong, to highlight a few. She has won a Naledi Theatre Award in 2014 for Best Actress in the supporting role and her debut album Izwi Lami, My Voice earned a Metro FM Music award for Best Music Video. Welcome to the show!
NONDUMISO	Thank you, sawubona, thank you so, so much for having me, happy holidays and it's really good to be home. I just landed pretty much a day or two ago; it's all a bit of a blur right now but it feels so good to be home.
DR. MALKA	Well we're glad to have you on home turf, as it were,....
NONDUMISO	...yeah...
DR. MALKA	...and look forward to digging deeper in terms of some of your experiences, both from a South African perspective and also from a US perspective. So to start off with you were born in Durban but raised....
NONDUMISO	...yes...
DR. MALKA	...in New York...
NONDUMISO	..yes...
DR. MALKA	...where both your parents studied music at Julliard...
NONDUMISO	...yes...
DR. MALKA	...and now your mom Linda Bukhosini is the Chief Executive of the Playhouse Company in Durban and your dad Bongani Tembe is the Chief Executive and Artistic Director of the KwaZulu-Natal Philharmonic Orchestra, so....
NONDUMISO	...and world renowned opera singers and fabulous artists themselves, I proudly have to say. They still sing quite a bit but....
DR. MALKA	That's fabulous....
NONDUMISO	...yes...
DR. MALKA	...well with that kind of heritage, the performance art is clearly in your DNA...
NONDUMISO	...yeah...
DR. MALKA	...and now you're based in Los Angeles and you're developing your acting career and given that brief intro with your mom and dad, can you tell us how your parents and your upbringing influenced some of your career choices?
NONDUMISO	Well perhaps the first thing is I think that when you come from an artistic family and then you go into the performing arts yourself there's always the assumption that you were somehow pressurised or pushed into it by your parents maybe and you know nothing could be further from the truth you know in terms of my life. I grew up in the wings and on stage, you know, I started performing in theatre, in opera and musical theatre with my parents at about six years old when they were still students at Julliard in New York and that happened very organically and very naturally. They did not

	<p>necessarily have any particular dreams for me to be anything in terms of one particular profession; they just raised me to believe that I could do anything really. If I worked really hard and had a formidable work ethic and really applied myself that the world was my oyster and you know I didn't as a child really understand the complexities and the limitations of being a woman in the world or a black person in the world or an African in the world, so I really did grow up believing that I could do anything and (coughs - excuse me) so they was sort of the wind beneath my wings in that sense; they gave me a great sense of self-confidence and this endless possibility so when I was younger I wanted to be everything, from you know, a bus driver like my grandfather to a ballerina, to an astronaut, to a scientist, to a doctor, to an actress, to just about everything you can imagine, so....to a sailor and honestly I believed that if I'd gone into any of these fields they would have supported me equally but you know I think I just was given...God sort of just awakened me to my purpose and my calling at a very, very young age in life and I was drawn in a very organic and natural way to the performing arts and I just understood and discovered my talents and my sort of purpose very early on in life and yeah, so it all sort of just evolved naturally from there.....</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>...and I guess in a way that being an actress and in the performance arts allows you to fulfil any role so whether it is a bus driver, whether it's a ballerina, an astronaut, you've got those opportunities to explore.</p>
NONDUMISO	<p>That's actually...that's really true and you know I also, I joke a lot and say you know I feel like you know I've lived one lifetime and yet I've lived...I get to live a hundred lifetimes. I get my life but then through all my different characters I get to live vicariously through them so you're absolutely right, it is kind of an extraordinary life and profession in that way because you get to walk in the shoes of so many different people from so many different....with so many different experiences and backgrounds and I think that's really special, that's probably the greatest gift of being an actor is it just breaks open your heart, your mind, your spirit in a very unique way, in a way that I don't think you get in any other profession. You're forced to have such a superhuman amount of empathy because your ability to tell someone else's story in a way that is non-judgemental and that is authentic and to really...really walk in someone else's...a strangers shoes and own their journey and their voice in a believable way is based on empathy and lack of judgement and understanding and an open mind and an open heart. So I think that's the greatest gift of my career is that really. But let me tell you I don't always play good people or women who are together...have it together you know, I've played a lot of troubled people, a lot of broken people or people with tremendous trauma so I have to say sometimes, depending on the role, but sometimes...sometimes I miss the character and having to step back into my own life, maybe because the character has thisamazing designer wardrobe every single day, I get to wear these amazing clothes and that's kind of fun to sort of just play dress up and escape your life in that sense for a moment and then if I'm playing someone, you know, with a very dark story it's such a relief to get to sort of come up for...come up for air and return back to my own sanity and my own life.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Now talking about characters and walking into other people's shoes and telling people's experiences and stories; what would you say have been some of your most memorable roles thus far and why?</p>
NONDUMISO	<p>You know I think the role that I just played last year in this wonderful, wonderful military drama called SIX produced by the History Channel and Aim Studios, I played a women's rights and girls education activist Na'omi Ajimuda...from....a Nigerian woman who lived a very fascinating life. One I</p>

	<p>think it was a wonderfully challenging experience for me as an actress to kind of get the opportunity to take a character from...I was sort of one of the leads of season one and to take a story and see it through the entire emotional arc and trajectory and evolution of a character from episode one to the final episode of the season was, you know, a wonderful challenge and experience for me as an actress and kind of a breakthrough really for me in my career, but I think it was....I think I just really grew a lot as an actress from that experience, not only because I was getting to play an African woman and someone whom I really, really deeply admired and you know I kind of feel like I would like to be Na’omi one day when I grow up or that even in another life I would have been Na’omi, I related with her so deeply and it’s almost like I got to be the best version of myself through this character and so just the experience of getting to tell her story, I mean her story was based around the abduction of the Chibok girls.....</p>
DR. MALKA	...so Boko Haram and...
NONDUMISO	<p>...Chibok girls ...exactly by Boko Haram in 2014 in North Eastern Nigeria, so that was a very important story to tell and one that I was very passionate about and had been before I got the role and I was really troubled by the way it was being covered in the news and just how it seemed like the girls voices were not...their story wasn’t being told and their voices and their families voices weren’t heard, so it was really a very important response....a tremendous honour and a responsibility that I took very seriously because I was telling a real story and it was a fictional character, but it was based on a story that I cared a lot about and that I think we were all deeply shaken by as Africans when it happened in 2014, and you know, getting to work opposite Walton Goggins who was you know such a phenomenal actor and someone very deeply admired and incredibly accomplished and experienced and getting to work with some of the greatest directors and writers in the world, you know, really captains of industry, people who were Academy Award nominated and Emmy Award winning, Golden Globe Award winning you know it really kind of forced me to up my game and yeah, it was just for many reasons, quite a seminal moment in my career.</p>
DR.MALKA	<p>And whilst we’re on the topic and I’m really glad that you raised this particular character and whilst we’re looking at it from an African perspective you’ve played Congolese women, West African women, East African women. One of the other programmes that I’d heard that you did was Witness Uganda which was a modern...</p>
NONDUMISO	...oh yeah...
DR. MALKA	...account of the story....
NONDUMISO	...musical, yeah...
DR. MALKA	...looking at a group of friends who adopt ten orphans and put them through school with their “Be The Change” NGO, so these are all really pertinent African stories...
NONDUMISO	...yeah...
DR. MALKA	<p>...and given the wide range of media and the longevity of certain productions, because let’s face it, media doesn’t just exist in one particular environment or in one particular timeframe and as such I think it plays a tremendously important role in cultural representation and also social influence...</p>
NONDUMISO	...yeah...
DR. MALKA	<p>...with particular respect to women across Africa I think it’s important that they are (a) appropriately represented in media content; (b) that their voices are heard and (c) that they’ve got greater representation across all sectors, so I wanted to ask you is women’s representation a factor that influences your choice of roles?</p>
NONDUMISO	<p>That’s a tough question. I mean it’s a great question and it’s a very noble question and my answer should be yes but if I’m really honest with you I</p>

	<p>wouldn't necessarily say that there is one particular agenda or concern that drives me when I approach roles or when I'm considering taking on a role. I think perhaps this thing that I can say is consistent no matter the role and its demands is that I'm always seeking the truth and I won't kind of negotiate on that so I want to tell the stories of very real, relatable, multi-dimensional, dynamic, complicated women or just human beings period. I think it kind of...it sort of depends on where I am in my life and what's on my mind and in my heart, you know, I think sometimes life imitates art and art imitates life so if you're maybe going through a breakthrough in your life...a breakup in your life and you're dealing with the pain of that or maybe the death...losing someone that you really love, you are sort of are gravit...you gravitate towards perhaps roles that either are the very opposite of that so you can kind of escape that pain or that allow you to kind of in a therapeutic sort of way deal with that pain and trauma through your art. So I suppose, I think the last year of my life, when I think about going from Na'omi Adjimuda in Six to... well I did play another role, I played....I did the Michael Jackson movie in between but then jumped into King Kong as Joyce but I'd say those two characters that I played within the space of a year are definitely maybe there was some sort of underlying or subconscious theme of strong women and lifting the voices of women who defy stereotypes and want to, you know, define themselves and not be defined by the world, want to be respected or recognised for their value and their works and their...whether it's their business acumen or their kind of activist work you know and contribution to society. So there has been that sort of theme I think kind of if I look at my career over the last year but I wouldn't....I'm sorry to say I wouldn't say that it's necessarily conscious, I try to stay just very open to what sort of the world and the universe is going to bring to me and then I just listen to my intuition and my instinct and I think....I will tell you this though, to answer your question probably a little bit better; what I'm always very conscious of is that I'm very clear that I never want to do work that perpetuates negative stereotypes about my people, about black people, about Africans and certainly about women, so maybe I know that sounds a little bit negative but it's not so much looking for a role that represent women in certain ways, but more being very clear that you want to be sure...you want to make sure that in whatever work that you do and whatever stories you are telling, you are not <u>perpetuating negative stereotypes</u>.</p>
DR. MALKA	Today we are talking to Nondumiso Tembe, a multi-award winning actress, singer and songwriter.
AD BREAK	
DR. MALKA	You are listening to 'Womanity – Women in Unity' on Channel Africa, the African Perspective, on frequency 9625 KHz, on the 31 meter band. Also available on DSTV; Channel 802. Today we're talking to Nondumiso Tembe, a multi-award winning actress, singer and songwriter. We would love to receive your comments on Twitter:@WomanityTalk.
DR. MALKA	So ultimately looking at the roles, the elements that you look out for is not necessarily something which is particularly about representing women but ultimately it is always about not perpetuating negative stereotypes and...
NONDUMISO	...absolutely...
DR. MALKA	...looking at roles which speak to you?
NONDUMISO	Absolutely, yeah.
DR. MALKA	You mentioned King Kong and I'm glad that you raised that point because there are two things that come to mind; (1) in terms of recreating the role of Joyce which propelled Miriam Makeba to international fame in the original production which is whew, nearly sixty years ago...

NONDUMISO	...yeah...
DR. MALKA	...and at the time it was the first all black South African musical in Apartheid South Africa, so I wanted to ask you two questions; (1) what was it like to step into the shoes of Mama Africa and the second question is how did you feel to re-enact such an important part of South African cultural history and depicting lives and the sentiment of the era?
NONDUMISO	<p>Wow well it was a pretty daunting task and a little bit...actually a lot than a little bit intimidating initially. I do have to point out though that I was not playing Miriam Makeba, I was playing Joyce and I think because of who Miriam Makeba was and who she is to us and what she means to us, there's...there was naturally that hype and that excitement of sort of who's going to be the next Mama Africa and you know a lot of questions about...I think people almost looked at it as if I was playing her and telling her story but I was playing the character of Joyce, which is a character, a role that I shared with her, so it was Joyce's story that I really needed to bring to life and Joyce's voice that I had to find and in understanding that and kind of unlocking that very early on, that really empowered me and helped me because it removed the, you know, the nerve and just the pressure of one kind of being compared to one of the greatest vocalists of all time who was just absolutely brilliant and also it meant that I didn't have to mimic or try to recreate someone else's performance. My task was to tell Joyce's story and to find her voice, the music was exceptionally hard, some of the hardest that I'd ever sung in my entire career so I was incredibly challenged musically and vocally which made the triumph of opening night and of really performing this show and finding my feet as Joyce, and even see the victory because you know when something has really pushed you to your limits and challenged you and pushed you out of your comfort zone and when you triumph in it it just feels so much better and you come out the other side just having grown so much as an artist. So as challenging as the music was and as intimidating as it was I conquered it, you know, and I really made the role my own and I feel incredibly proud of the work that I did and the performance that I crafted in that role. So yeah, so the first step for me was really kind of releasing myself from the pressure of having to try to mimic her or what we would have imagined was her performance because remember this is a performance that was staged about sixty years ago, very few people saw the original and we have recordings of her singing the role of Joyce but...and some archival footage in terms of old production photos but we don't really know how that performance was manifested and so that was sort of helpful in the sense that audience members and people maybe and myself included had an idea what she would have sounded like or how she would have breathed life into the role, but I also then had the freedom of because of so much time and not really having a recording or a movie version of her as Joyce it sort of did allow me artistic freedom and then also you know our wonderful director Jonathan Munby very early on, you know, made it very clear that our approach in this production was that this was a re-imagining of the original, not a revival or a re-staging...a restaging of the original which means that we all had a, you know, the gift of artistic and creative freedom and could really sort of approach all of our roles you know with our own kind of artistic instincts and interpretations, of course staying true to the original, but I don't know if you're aware but some new music was written for our new staging, our new show or our new version of King Kong and of course we had the wonderful and brilliant Gregory Maqoma doing the choreography which was brand new, so there was a lot of fresh blood and fresh ideas and fresh energy kind of comes into this new incarnation of King Kong and so yeah, that allowed me a lot of artistic freedom otherwise I think I would have been very</p>

	<p>inhibited and overwhelmed and being compared to or trying to live up to Miriam Makeba, you know, but I like to think that every night, you know, on stage I'd sort of blow kisses up to heaven to her, just before I'd gone on stage to start our big number, the very famous Back of the Moon and I'd like to think that she was smiling down on me from heaven as well and that she knows that I did my best to honour her legacy and to celebrate her and while still making the role my own but you know artists like that paved the way and made it possible for young black female artists like myself to have a gliding and successful international career. So I owe her a lot and she means a lot to me as well so I wanted to celebrate her in small ways in the performance.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>And I think that also gives the opportunity to a new generation to experience King Kong and for what it is and what it was.</p>
NONDUMISO	<p>Yeah. You had a second part of your....</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>...yes and that for me is almost like the more serious part and I suppose it's a bit of the way we're reflecting in terms of South Africa on our history, so the second part was really about the fact of the culture of how life was in that time and to experience it, although obviously it is an imitation of it, but context I think plays a tremendous role in terms of what is happening in an environment, it shapes societies.</p>
NONDUMISO	<p>Yeah well you know I think you kind of hit the nail on the head just now when we were talking about giving a new generation an opportunity to experience the show in the story, I think what was really exciting about this production and also just our approach to it being a reimagining, not a strict restaging of the original is that we were able to re-introduce this iconic and classic and very historical and incredibly important piece of work to a new generation, to a new audience and we did take some creative and artistic liberties by re-contextualising the show, for example in the original,..... who is the story's narrator, tells the story to a group of washer women in 1950 Sophiatown, the story of King Kong, in our production...our 2017 production he encounters a group of young boys in 2017 playing soccer and you know boys that are kind of potentially about to go down the same negative path that King Kong did and he recognises something in one of the boys that reminds him of King Kong and then sort of tells the story then and takes them on this journey, tells them the story of the rise and fall of this great man, Ezekiel Dlamini, which is what takes us back in time into the 1950's. So I think that was a very clever way to kind of re-contextualise and maybe draw in a younger audience and just keep things kind of fresh and up to date and exciting and that worked really well, but yeah, in terms of telling the story of the period, it was painful at times, it's a very dark and painful time in our history, especially for a black South African cast to have to revisit. Sophiatown in the 1950's, this is around the period when you know the bulldozers were coming through and demolishing the place and displacing so many people illegally and the lives of so many black people, so many black families were trampled on and their hopes and their dreams kind of just kind of just dashed and that was painful. I think what helped was that...what helped this from being such a dark and heavy story in the world is that there is so much life and joy and music and art and dance and love bursting through Sophiatown itself, I mean if you know of a chorus and we all kind of know of and remember Sophiatown, it was legendary, it was the South African...or the African version of you know the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem in the 1920's, it's the place that where art and intellectuals and you know young activists and writers and singers and songwriters sort of thrived and it was this kind of secret world of against a backdrop of a very dark socio-political reality and the ugly and icy grip of oppression that was apartheid. This was a space where black people could go</p>

	<p>and sort of during...at night at least, escape the pain of their daily reality and so my character in particular Joyce was sort of the vehicle for that because she created this Shebeen, Back of the Moon, for her community, of course to be a business woman and to provide for herself but also as sort of a gift, an escape for her community and so I think finding the joy in that, in the music and the dance and the life of these people, the story itself not being a political story at all. I mean of course we understand the backdrop and the socio-historical sort of backdrop and reality at the time but the story itself is not a political story, it's about the rise and fall of a complicated man, it's about love, it's about watching these complicated characters navigate through the ups and downs of life which is very universal and relatable for anyone of any background from any race or age group and I think that's kind of the magic of the piece and why it is able to stand the test of time. You get, you know, a good love story, a good love triangle no matter where you set it in the world, whether it's Shakespeare in Venice in the 1600's or Sophiatown South Africa in the 1950's, I think you know a good love story and great characters and just watching interesting relatable human beings kind of just fall and fumble and fail and...</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>....it...look those stories absolutely transcend time and I think that's one of the important aspects of reproductions, I mean look how long Shakespeare has lived in terms of all the different renditions of his plays.</p>
NONDUMISO	<p>...exactly...</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>And that concludes the first part of our interview with Nondumiso Tembe. Tune in next week for part two.</p>
	<p>PROGRAMME END</p>