

Durban University of Technology

Guest speech

Award of an Honorary Doctorate to Professor Lewis Nkosi

Address by Professor Astrid Starck-Adler
(April 12, 2012)

Dear Chancellor, The Honorable Judge Vuka Tshabalala
Dear Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Professor AC Bawa
Dear Chair of Council, Dr J. Reddy
Dear Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design, Dr Kenneth Netshimbo
Dear Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Design, Professor Graham Stewart
Dear Academic Staff, dear Support staff, dear graduates, dear parents and guests of the
Durban University of Technology
Ladies and Gentlemen,

How delighted and honoured Professor Lewis Nkosi would have been to receive this second award in his hometown where he now rests in peace forever, high up in *Stella wood*, facing the Indian Ocean, under an ancestral tree which hosts so many singing birds praising him for having made them famous in his novel “Mating Birds”! These wonderful songs prevent him from being too peaceful, he who had this wondering and loving eye on people and worlds, an eye widely open to explore the multifaceted human psyche, and to pay tribute both to the beauty of the body and the effervescence of the spirit.

To speak in Professor Nkosi’s name is a difficult task, since his colleagues and friends know how brilliant, witty and original his address would have been, combining surprise, pleasure and delight. Indeed it is an honour for me to speak in Professor Nkosi’s name, and I would like to thank the DUT and all the people who made this award possible in Professor Nkosi’s hometown, Durban, where he used to come after the end of the Apartheid era, either to deliver lectures, or to participate in the international festival *The Time of the Writer*, or to conduct research for his memoir, *The Memoirs of a motherless child*, or simply to enjoy himself, walking at a beach open to everybody. The degree of doctor honoris causa [I quote the Vice Chancellor] “in recognition of his significant contributions as a prolific and profound South African writer and essayist” is a great honour. It is also a great ceremonial day for these young, beautiful and bright students amongst whom Prof. Nkosi would have been delighted to sit – as well as amongst his peers –, but as one knows, without students, there is nobody to teach and without artists, there is nobody to teach about! This high recognition shows how important Lewis Nkosi’s work was in the past, and how important it will be in the future, for young people, who didn’t know him because his writing was banned under apartheid and he had to live in exile for over 30 years, not knowing if he would ever see his country again before dying. In its essence and through its impact, Lewis Nkosi’s critical and literary work will go on questioning and engaging new generations of artists, thinkers and writers. It’s witty and ironical power, it’s humorous and tender beauty, it’s very personal touch and profound originality contributed to the production of his struggling country which he supported in his own way through all these years abroad. Not only is Lewis

Nkosi a profound SA writer, but as a writer who “is worth more visibility inside the literature panorama, not African only, but world-wide”. These are the words of his Italian translator, Toni Dalla Libera, who just published his play, *The Black Psychiatrist* and his poems in the literary Magazine *Africa e Mediterraneo*. It gives an astonishing profile of our laureate author whom the translator compares to Milan Kundera.

If we go briefly back to the biography, we see that in spite of the adversity and difficulties young Lewis had to face, when he was a child and a teenager, as an orphan and under the apartheid regime which wanted to annihilate black people both in their body and in their mind, Lewis Nkosi believed, as many of his country fellow women and men, in the spoken and written word, in songs and music as tools of expression for self-consciousness, rebellion, and access to liberty. He liked to tell the anecdote about the first book he bought with his first salary: *Tell Freedom*, by Peter Abrahams, how it unleashed his uncle’s anger upon his nephew, “such a spendthrift,” but also how this extraordinary book opened for him a horizon as wide as the Indian Ocean: Peter Abrahams showed him, Lewis would say, that he too was able to write.

As a singer in the school choir at Eshowe, he was attracted by lyrics. Later on he became a great jazz lover and wrote his famous essay on “Jazz in Exile”. He knew every tune and played the piano wonderfully.. At that time already, jazz was great and popular amongst intellectuals in SA. I remember how, far away, in Basel, as a young girl, I went to listen to Dollar Brand, his later wife Sathima Bea Benjamin and Makaya Ntshoko, who all three escaped South Africa and came to Switzerland. The passion for music influenced Nkosi’s writing. He wrote wonderful Zulu songs for the SA composer Stanley Glasser, *Lalela Zulu*; sung by *The King’s Singers*. They can be found on the Internet.

As a young journalist, first at the Zulu Newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal*, then *The Golden City Post* in Durban, later in Johannesburg at *Drum Magazine*, on which he reports in his essay “The Fabulous Decade”, he got in touch with intellectuals and thinkers, writers and poets, artists and musicians, who deepened his sensibility and sharpened his way of shaping ideas and thoughts. He engaged his brilliant intelligence and his wide knowledge into pioneering analyses and essays, and, as a former actor, he was a fabulous reader of his own texts. His perception of society, literature and history was that of a situationist, before this movement even appeared. As an example, let us quote here the following excerpt:

“On 30 August 1958, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane and saxophonist-actor Zakes Mokae performed *No-Good Friday*, at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre with Fugard directing and Sheila Fugard serving as manager of their African Theatre Workshop company. To produce a play with a racially mixed cast was a daring move in 1958; and when *No-Good Friday* had a one night performance in Johannesburg’s Brooke Theatre, a white audience venue, Lewis Nkosi acted the role of Father Higgins, which Fugard had been playing... The play is set in Sophia Town, the black township which would later be destroyed.” (Albert Wertheim: *The dramatic art of Athol Fugard: from South Africa to the world*.)

Prof. Nkosi was also a playwright. To see one’s own plays performed on stage can be the most amazing event. Nkosi’s plays have been read or performed by students and professional actors, broadcast on Radio and TV, but unfortunately, some of them are lost (*Rhythm of violence*, *Malcolm (lost)*, *We cannot all be Martin Luther King*). The last play which

has been performed is *The Black Psychiatrist*, which toured in many French and English speaking African and European countries (it has been produced at the Pompidou Centre in Paris and also in the French Caribbean island Martinique, where Lewis Nkosi had the moving opportunity to meet the great poet of Négritude, Aimé Césaire, a movement which Lewis discussed in his book of essays *Tasks and Masks*). Until now, *The Black Psychiatrist* has never been performed in South Africa, but I was told that DUT has one of the most famous departments of Drama and Production Studies. How marvellous it would be to see this play – and the sequel to it, *Flying Home* – put on stage here, in Prof. Nkosi's hometown. *Flying Home*, a sulphurous play with an ironical postapartheid and postcolonial background, stages the two main figures of *The Black Psychiatrist*, Dr. Kerry and Gloria, as they are ready to fly back to the new democratic SA after having been so long in exile; but they get stuck at Heathrow Airport. An airport! What a wonderful metaphor for life as an existential transit and transition, an object of desire and rejection, unexpected meetings, new departures, changes and delays, in a confined space and time. The airport literature became a new literary genre, replacing the station, which had been for decades the scene of acceleration, urbanization and industry.

I would like to **end** by evoking Prof. Nkosi as a script writer for the emblematic 1959 film, ***Come back Africa***, the first antiapartheid film shot in SA. In 2000, we brought a video tape and screened this still unknown film in SA. Of course it had been banned for years. Together with Bloke Modisane and the American filmmaker Lionel Rogosin, an astonishing film was born, a film belonging to the genre of Cinema vérité, where there are no professional actors. It is indeed a masterpiece, which after 50 years, still expresses an inner strength capable of finding its way through the years without a wrinkle. This film bears an historical testimony to the vivid cultural and artistic life in Sophia Town, the township which played a major role in Black Consciousness in the 60's in Johannesburg, and which for that reason had to be eradicated. The film brings scenes from the shebeens, with fascinating discussions about politics and literature, and it shows the great singer Miryam Makeba who got international fame through the film. At the Apartheid Museum, where people can see an excerpt of the film, no writer is mentioned by name. When I asked the director why, he told me: we cannot put everybody's name!

I would like to finish my remarks by quoting Prof. Nkosi and his reflexion on identities. This is from his article *Luster's lost Quarter*:

“One of the principal assumptions in my readings of William Faulkner's text, *Go Down, Moses*, has been a belief that identities are to a very large extent shaped by an attachment to a particular place. Clearly, land is such a place. But after the land has been conquered there is the heart to conquer. In J.M.Coetzee's *In The Heart of the Country*. Magda who calls herself 'a poetess of interiority', ponders the issue: 'Is it possible that there is an explanation for all the things I do, and that the explanation lies inside me, like a key rattling in a can, waiting to be taken out and used to unlock the mystery?'(p,62) Magda's debilitating quest for (a)filliation is an impossible wish which is already proscribed by society and which psychoanalytic doctrine has already discovered as out of bounds for many of us, perhaps even unattainable except in dreams and fantasy, to which Magda has her answer: 'Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained.' (135). Quite obviously, identities are not only constructed in an interior psychic space cluttered with imaginary objects of desire; these identities are also shaped

by a unique attachment to a specific physical place. Towards the end of her volatile monologue Magda reflects that: ‘The feeling of solitude is a longing for a place.’”

May Prof. Nkosi rest in peace in his regained place.

I thank you for your attention and express congratulations to the graduands and their parents.