

# Simoné Benjamin

Gilmore Smith chats to this remarkable young woman about her craft, her career and her community spirit.

Photograph by Wade Hunkin

**S**imoné Benjamin is exactly why I'm forever optimistically proudly South African. This 28-year-old drama graduate is one of the young South Africans who, despite the opportunity to make her fortune overseas teaching her acquired skills to foreign learners, chose to plough back into her community by using her skills to uplift the people of her home country where she acquired those very skills.

Growing up in a loving small-town household in Bredasdorp where she was exposed to different cultures and cultural events from a very young age by her parents, both teachers, she truly got a feel for theatre and the arts.

At the age of 16, while attending Bloemhof Girls High School in Stellenbosch, and having to make her subject selection, she chose drama simply because "I wasn't really fond of biology as I was never good at it! I observed a drama class and there were 10 pupils all sitting on the floor and acting on stage and they're getting marks for it!! So I chose drama..."

After graduating from Stellenbosch University with an honours degree in drama in 2011, Simoné worked in theatre and radio, was an eTV presenter, and worked on a documentary short film for SABC3. She has fulfilled various positions in the theatre industry, from usher to playing a leading role on stage, to gain as much experience as possible about every aspect of the industry while literally sleeping on a friend's couch 'and cleaning the house to pay the rent'. Her hunger for knowledge about the industry overrode every ounce of pride she might have had.

Being the independent go-getter she is, taking on any challenge and grabbing every opportunity facing her, she left for China about two years ago to teach drama to 3–11-year-old children. While doing this, she had the epiphany that she was applying skills acquired in South Africa in a different country while it could and should be applied in her own country. Though she missed her family [mother and two older sisters], whom she's very close to, Simoné admits that her decision to return was "...not for my mom and family, but to give back to my country what I'd got from my country".

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Returning to SA, she's now working as the Corporate Social Investment Controller (CSI) for an international South African liquor company based in Stellenbosch. In this role, her aim is to marry the corporate world with the arts by creating opportunities for young artists to hone their talents. This is being done through various community projects.

Although working in a full-time job doing her part for the growth and development of arts in South Africa, Simoné is still busy living her dream of being a performer.

Her latest work saw her performing with some of the biggest names in Afrikaans theatre in the much-acclaimed Afrikaans radio drama, *Die Verdwyning van Mina Afrika* and its follow-up *Die Tuiskoms van Mina Afrika*, where she played the title role on popular Afrikaans radio station RSG earlier this year. She refers to the legendary Margot Luyt (director of *Die Verdwyning van Mina Afrika*) as her mentor who taught her everything she knows about performing for radio.

This experience inspired her to initiate a CSI radio drama project focusing on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. "Through doing this drama for RSG, I realised that a lot of people are still listening to radio stories and that this medium impacts the education and upliftment of our communities." Her initiative for the CSI radio drama project became one of the flagship projects and was broadcast on various community stations nationwide during 2016 and 2017 in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa.

As a role model for many young people she encounters on a daily basis, Simoné says that her idols are her two older sisters who practise as an educational psychologist and accountant respectively, her mother, a now retired teacher, and her father who passed away a couple of months before she graduated.

Listening to Simoné Benjamin, the small-town girl from Bredasdorp, I can only salute this young, dynamic, proudly South African woman, knowing that we definitely haven't heard and/or seen the last of this 'corporate actress' – her own term because "I'm an actress working in the corporate world, therefore I'm a corporate actress".

*corporate actress and  
community activist*

