





Soli Philander

living to the fullest

In a candid interview with Gilmore Smith, comedian Soli Philander talks about his zest for life, his successful career and his heritage.

Photograph by GoosePhoto

Making his professional debut on national television as a 21-year-old from Elsies River in Cape Town, Soli Philander had no inkling that he would very quickly become a household name throughout his country, let alone be regarded as a groundbreaking artist not only for making *Kaaps* an acceptable dialect on TV, but also all the other dialects in our country.

What makes Soli's success as an SA comedian even more remarkable is that during his more than 30 years in the industry, he never once tried to and/or allowed his Kaapse heritage to be compromised. This is easy to understand when talking to him and becoming aware of the high value he puts on integrity in everything he does.

Given that he made his debut in 1982, at the height of our country's previous regime's State of Emergency, he obviously had many stumbling blocks to conquer at the start of his career.

Thanks to the life lessons learned while being raised by his Granny, Annie, he was not only prepared to deal with the tough entertainment industry, but was also well enough equipped to tackle the stumbling blocks, one at a time, in his path. Soli is very quick to say that he has never regarded himself as doing groundbreaking work and "never intended to break down doors, all I wanted to do was perform." Everything he did was done out of necessity because he had very clear ideas about the things he wanted and what he wanted to achieve in his career.

Growing up in Elsies River with a natural affinity for languages and dramatics, Soli's always been aware of being 'different'. His saving grace, however, was the fact that his Granny and

his family (on orders of the matriarch), allowed him to be different because, for her, he was 'special'. Because she believed in him "you can be whatever you want to," he felt empowered by this and it became and remains one of the main forces steering and guiding him. Growing up with this sense of being treasured brought along a deep-seated appreciation for the opportunities he was given in his career, and in life. Because he was fortunate to have his Granny's unconditional support for, and belief in, what he did, and experienced the empowerment value of that support, he strongly believes that every child needs at least one person who believes in them.

Despite his fame and achievements and having worked with some of the biggest names in the entertainment industry, Soli has got his two feet firmly grounded on mother earth and in his roots. "Growing up in Elsies River," he says, "we were poor and there was little, but we were happy. What I never lacked in Elsies River was respect, the knowledge of how to be human and understanding beauty. All the wisdom was there, all I needed was the opportunities."

With a strong belief in the synergies of the universe, Soli is very conscious of his blessings as well as his responsibility to give back – not only as an artist, but also as a human being, hence his involvement in a variety of charities ranging from organisations focusing on the empowerment of women, education, children and the youth. "All these organisations work in my community and among the people I know and who support me, so I have to do my bit and help wherever I can." This is a further manifestation of his deep-felt gratitude towards his fans and supporters.

This gratitude and humbleness is further demonstrated when Soli says, "I'm useless at bragging about myself. I grew up in a community with better performers/storytellers than me. I was lucky to have found the platform to tell the stories to a wider audience." He continues to say that it has never been about him, but always only about his work. He purely ever sees himself as a channel for the work he does.

After more than three decades in the industry, there's absolutely no thought given to retirement. Soli's life's mission is to be his most amazing self. "To live myself to the fullest. To be the most me. To live my skin full."

He strongly believes that life is a creative process and says, "creativity is spirit, it's the holiness, the other, the bigger" and adds that therefore all of us are godly because we create. "I am living, and have lived, a creative life. I've created characters, spaces, things."

The 56-year-old artist (".. unapologetically 56!") and father of four grown-up children unequivocally states that he's completely content with how his life turned out. On being asked to define this contentedness, Soli philosophically says that "the test to measure a successful you is waking up at 4am, looking in the mirror and being OK with that guy in the mirror. I'm really good with Soli Philander, we're good, there are no regrets." He adds that the absolute grace in this life is "to have lived your life so that you are what you're meant to be."

Don't miss Soli Philander in his latest one-man show, *Nica Coat*, at the Artscape in November. See our Events Diary for details and follow us on social media to see how you can win tickets to see his show.