

Hanging out our own washing



South African soap operas bring their own interpretation of post-apartheid lifestyles onto our small screens, says Zingisa Mkhuma.

As we moved into the late '80s and the *Dynasty* generation lost interest and moved on, in came the most popular international-acclaimed soapie, *The Bold and the Beautiful*. It attracted an even younger and bigger following than *Dynasty* did. *The Bold*, as it is fondly known here, is a wealth of lessons in how money, youth, beauty and talent can take people to heights they never thought possible. Exposure to *The Bold* has given rise to a generation bent on emulating the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

Based on the success of *The Bold*, it was a matter of time before local producers came up with our own local version to keep us captivated. And so *Generations*, the oldest and the most popular home-brewed soapie, born almost 10 years ago, is watched by many races. *Generations* has certainly been ahead of the game in promoting the idea that black African people

could be captains of industry and power-players. From the outset, it introduced the central theme of the show: advertising agencies headed and largely staffed by black South Africans.

Although this sounded mythical – an advertising agency headed by a black family, as was the case with the Morokas – in the last 10 years we have had several successful and black-owned agencies such as Azaguys, The Agency and Herdbuoys (now Herdbuoys McCann Erickson South Africa). In the early days of *Generations*, there were many white faces with major roles. This has changed slowly; the white actors today are a much smaller percentage of the cast, which is a truer reflection of the demographics of the country.

As a sign of the times, *Generations* also brought to our screens a non-racial society which was beginning to shape itself along the same lines as a real post-



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Zingisa Mkhuma edits *Verve*, the lifestyle section of *The Star* newspaper. As a survivor of the 1976 turmoil, she is grateful to be alive and is currently thinking of writing a book of her experiences of June 16 to pay tribute not only to her school mates, dead and alive, but also to the ordinary men and women who supported South African youth as they marched against Bantu education and other oppressions.

apartheid South African society. We began to see how people of different races and cultures shared a house, and some even a bedroom, without the social structure crumbling. Initially, the scriptwriters trod carefully. We had white married to white and black African kissing black African.

But gradually, as we moved into the late '90s, the tempo shifted. We had our first dose of mixed relationships.

Another milestone for *Generations* is that over the past year in particular, the producers have shifted the language goalposts, moving away from the original, all English dialogue, to an almost "50/50-mix" (as Mandoza would say) of African languages. There are English subtitles when the actors speak in various African languages, from Xhosa to Sotho.

The script is often written to reflect major changes in our country, such as the first elections,

and the most recent ones. We have had local music stars come in and out at intervals.

Sexual and romantic relationships across the colour line, family and sexual abuse – all issues pertinent to our society also affect characters in the soapie. Storylines with HIV have been included. The issue they don't seem to have got right to date is homosexuality. There was a storyline some time ago about a bisexual character (Vivian), but the plot was turned into blood and gore. All the bad things that happened were blamed on her "deranged" bisexual female lover. We don't need scenes which are going to perpetuate stereotypes about gay people. The fact that they quickly made sure Vivian was heterosexual didn't help the matter and must have left a lot of gay viewers hanging.

Recently there has been a sub-plot with a straight guy pretending to be gay to be near the girl he loves (a storyline used endlessly in the movies over the years). Then the producers made their feelings on gays very clear by using derogatory terms, describing the so-called gay guy as a "moffie". But again, one can argue this is how some people still refer to gay men.

The popular series *Isidingo* has also shown how soapies are dealing with post-apartheid South African trends when it comes to relationships. There was the much talked-about relationship between Derek Nyathi and Phillipa de Villiers, the former mine manager's daughter. In the South Africa of old, the norm was that young, beautiful black women inadvertently fell in love with old white men. But De Villiers and Nyathi were both young, vivacious and have a great on-screen chemistry, which at times fooled the public into believing they were a real-life couple.

There is current mine manager, Jack van Onselen, a coloured man who married a white woman and adopted her teenage daughter as well. Then the inspirational story of Agnes Matabane who came from a rural area to join her husband in the mines. With her entrepreneurial spirit, prevalent among African women in real-life situations, Agnes sells chicken feet to increase her husband's salary. At the same time, she goes to adult literacy classes. At present she has made a name for herself and her family, and like many middle class South Africans, has invested a great deal in her children's education at private schools.

Agnes' battle against her husband's wish to take a second wife also reflects a dilemma many women, especially the black elite, are grappling with. It is an open secret that some of the new black millionaires have second wives or mistresses. In most instances, the older wife will resist, while young women are much more obliging.

Despite her gallant efforts, life hasn't been smooth sailing for Agnes. She had to fight a sad battle as her husband, disregarding her unhappiness, went ahead and impregnated young Refiloe, once the family helper. Tradition forced Agnes to swallow the bitter pill and stay in the marriage, which is still the case in our society today.

Female characters have shifted from the married, stay-at-home mum, trying to raise successful heirs to the throne, to the single, successful, entrepreneur or professional woman in her 20s or early 30s. This is the type of woman that every new magazine on our shelves is targeting with its glossy covers, selling sex, fashion and beauty stories. She is every man's dream, because of her youth. She has some brains and is not shy about the fact that she will not fall in love with just any man. It has to be someone with money, power and status.

These are the women, who unlike their mothers,

who sought freedom, are seeking "slavery – they want the Ring, the White Wedding, the Bugaboo Frog Stroller – and hey, let them have it," noted British author Erica Jong. They too will mature and eventually come out of this phase.

Generations has responded to local and international trends towards younger characters by the slow but sure removal of older characters. First it was Baba, the old boarding house owner (wife and then former wife of the barman Sonny), who we were told was given the boot gently, more because of her age (early 50s by the look of her) than her colour. Recently it was the character of Dr Mandla Sithole (Fana Mokoena) in his mid-40s by all accounts, who bit the bullet – literally in his case. In a recent interview, the producer would not be drawn into the matter choosing to say: "We have now settled into the new *Generations*." So does this mean other key characters like Mattie (Shaleen Surtie Richards) and Sonny (Cedwyn Joel) – both, we were told some time ago, would be given the boot from the show – will be on their way out soon or could already have been written out?

What all this means is that television producers are following many 21st century media trends, including the sidelining of maturity in favour of the up-and-coming youth. So, yes, in this too, *Generations* is staying within the new decade guidelines.

Back to *Isidingo*. Now going for about six years, it had started out (set on a mine outside Johannesburg) with a whiter-than-white cast except for the shots of the poor sods working down the mine. However, throughout its run it has gone to great pains to grow and change and the scripts clearly reflect that. Over the past two years, black Africans have been given far greater roles, central to the storylines.

Isidingo has also moved away from mine life and into a television studio scenario, which gives the show the chance to mix white and black characters – right now about a 60/40 share in favour of black Africans. The language is predominantly English although a few African language lines are thrown in here and there.

Isidingo is brilliant at bringing the script right up to date by shooting news of the day into the day's filming. On the day of the most recent elections, characters were talking about it and holding the day's newspaper with the appropriate headlines.

On the sexual side of things they too have gone through the whole shebang. Older woman, younger man, affairs, mixed race romances and the like.

Perhaps the most captivating story has been the story of love and endurance between Parsons Matabane and Nandipha Sithole, who is HIV positive. The two have been through hell as young people who are in love and dealing with the stigma surrounding HIV/Aids. Viewers have been educated about challenges faced by people living with HIV/Aids and those who support them. For instance, once Matabane's family found out that Nandipha was HIV positive, they rejected her and went as far as refusing to eat food prepared by her because they feared being infected.

We have also been educated about the sacrifices women like Agnes have to make. The upside to Agnes's story is that her children will probably be those that we see on the youngest and latest entry in soapie stakes, *Backstage*.

This is the generation that wants to see itself on the big screen or on the stage. Young, talented and ambitious, this soapie is a reflection of where we are as a country. The pressures of being young – drugs, alcohol, crime and fame – are all reflected in this new soapie.