

# SEEKING THE SOUL OF MZANSI



*Mital Shah has elegantly captured the threads of South African life in the glossy book 'Well Souled'; CARL COLLISON spoke to her about her journey*

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**'S**outh Africans express their style in a very emotional way. There is real individuality here; it's definitely not collective," says Mital Shah, the woman behind the strikingly handsome photographic coffee-table book, *Well Souled*. "I've carried this book around the world," says Shah, gesturing to her very toned arms, apparently the consequence of carrying around this rather hefty 'baby'. The book in question, a 312-page tome, which is lush and indulgent and takes as its inspiration this beautiful and richly diverse country – South Africa. It includes beautifully executed portraits of urban front-liners, the ubiquitous shots of the Big Five, with gumboot dancers mixed into the schizophrenic beauty of struggle images and the always fun images of 50s *Drum* magazine pin-up girls.

A fresh-faced beauty, Shah, whose first name roughly translates into 'one who brings light', speaks with effusive passion about what she calls the 'threads of life' that have led her on this journey. To say that Shah has had a diverse career background would be a gross understatement. Born in Connecticut (one of America's most socio-economically divided states) and raised near Boston, she studied in the foreign service because she 'loved different cultures'. After this stint she ended up in business working for an investment bank in Hong Kong, Korea and Japan. It was after this that she found what would ultimately lead to the conception of *Well Souled*: her stint at noted design house, Vera Wang. This five-year sojourn as the special assistant to the president of the house (whose name she would not divulge) introduced her to more than just



FASHION FORWARD: Stylist Feipe Mazibuko.

Picture: Gerald Förster



MUSIC MAKER: Celist Kutlwano Masole.  
Picture: Mark Leibowitz

the inner workings of a small design house, now a global couture and décor phenomenon. There Shah experienced, for the first time, the very real, painful loss of the company's president (who was also her mentor and friend) to the disease countless South Africans deal with on a daily basis: HIV/AIDS.

Before what would have been yet another step in her career trajectory – this time as a strategist at a major global brand looking to infiltrate the appealing emerging markets in the East – Shah found herself sitting with a friend in a coffee shop one night pondering not only whether to accept this job offer, but where she, as an individual was headed. "My friend said to me: 'you have all the ingredients. Now it is time for you to simply put them together,'" she recalls. "On my way home I finally had the idea of doing this project."

Her decision to initiate the project in South

Africa had less to do with the usual exoticising of distant lands ("I knew nothing about this country") than with the very real empathy she developed with the masses of nameless, faceless people affected by HIV/AIDS, the same disease she has had such a profound first-hand experience with. It was this loss and the resultant empathy that led Shah to commit 20% of the book's sales to yet-to-be-named local HIV/AIDS organisations.

It was from here that Shah began her epic, soul-fulfilling journey to and through South Africa – with photographers Marc Leibowitz and Gerald Förster in tow. And it was to be in the glittering jungle of Johannesburg that her journey started. What was her first impression of this city, I ask? "Fast. It is very fast. Ideas come out fast; people are fast. But, coming from New York [where she is currently based], I was totally ready to take it on," she laughs.

**A**nyone tasked with executing her single-minded determination to capture as many aspects of this diverse country (fashion, landscapes, cultural icons young and old, food etc) as humanly possible, might have caved in under the weight of the task. Not Shah. With her admirable and sincere belief in allowing the process to be wholly organic, she has not only made her load as orchestrator considerably lighter, but has also ensured a richness to the final product that is as tangible as the rich paper – a mix of linen, metallic foil and gloss – used in the book.

"When I first got here, I was talking to a friend of mine who said I should experience Alexandra [township] first-hand. It was then that she said

I should meet her friend, Nthato," she recalls. "It was a Sunday morning and, although Nthato was clearly asleep, he agreed to come and meet us to take me around Alex."

It is this meeting that proved to be Shah's gateway to much of the rest of her largely serendipitous journey. Nthato Mashishi, arguably South Africa's most recognisable make-up artist – 'make-up artist to the stars' as he is so often called – steered Shah in the direction of noted musician Simphiwe Dana, cultural activist and filmmaker Peter Makurube and the perennially beautiful acting dynamo Bonnie Henna, to name but a few.

Mashishi admits to having fallen in love with the project, but says his initial impression of Shah was fiercely influenced by his cynicism. "Oh, at first I thought this was another one of those oh-they're-trying-to-do-something-on-Africa situations. I didn't think it would happen,"



ON THE MOVE: Members of the Cape Town-based Dance for All Dance Company. Pictures: Mark Leibowitz

he remembers. "But, the more Mital spoke about this project, the more convinced I became of it actually happening."

And happen it did. Funding for the project – "More than half-a-million dollars, much more than that," confides Shah – came from the pockets of her generous friends, colleagues and others who "just believed in the product". (Affluent connections such as these leaves one with little doubt as to from which side of the Connecticut tracks Shah hails.) The sales have been going fantastically, says Shah, the print run of 5 000 copies might seem small to some, but the fact that only word-of-mouth advertising has been used to punt the book, speaks volumes. It also makes its title, *Well Souled*, unintentionally apt, so these investors, or benefactors, will surely not regret their largesse.

Typical of this type of project, most of the sales of *Well Souled* are to be found abroad – thanks to South Africa's poor book-buying culture rearing its ugly head once again. Shah is, however, consoled by the fact that "now sales in South Africa are starting to pick up".

**W***ell Souled* features the modern-day icons of Mzansi, and this is one of its strengths. Those I spoke to praise not only the excellent quality of the book's production, but also speak highly of Shah. Makurube, the noted filmmaker and community activist, has this to say about Shah: "She's fantastic, I respect her a lot, simply because she took such a chance putting this book together. Also, she is very humble. She didn't come here with the typical imposing American attitude. She was very respectful towards everybody. If you look at what she has written you can see she's got a very good heart."

**D**ana, too, has nothing but praise for Shah when I ask her why she felt the need to be part of this project – which, in my opinion, has yielded arguably one of the most beautiful and tender portraits of this singing sensation. “I basically felt that she was authentic about delving into the different cultures and wanting to represent them in a sincere way through fashion and lifestyle or whatever,” says Dana.

And it’s not just fashion and lifestyle that Shah has chosen to focus this book on in her valiant attempt at capturing everything that makes this sometimes farcically diverse land of ours tick.

Despite the brilliance of Shah’s love project, it has been a slow burner. It is a sad indictment on the South African book-buying public. But, given the heavy price tag of around R900 – almost as heavy as the book itself, some could argue – it is definitely not destined for the heady bestseller heights of something like John van de Ruit’s *Spud* – or anything by Wilbur Smith for that matter. I ask Shah about this: Did she not consider the cover price a bit steep for the average South African? (As much as I love the book, I refused to buy one myself, instead opting for the usual hustling of publishers).

“Well, the price [US\$110] is the same wherever in the world you are, which we thought was fair,” she says. My socialist attitude when it comes to information distribution makes way for the harder reality of the fact that, given the lushness of the finished product, it is no real surprise that the price is as high as it is.

Shah also defends the poor distribution and



FLORAL FASHIONS: Flower couture

FUNKY FOODIE: YFM's Sanza de Fanatik's Sunday lunches.

Pictures: Mark Leibowitz

advertising of the book. “I want people to find it on their own. It really is not about being pushy,” she says.

So, what’s next for the intrepid Shah? “Well, next will be *Well Souled India*. In fact,” she says, “the threads connecting me to the India leg have already started showing themselves. It seems as though all I really have to do is simply show up for the party.” Thereafter, the *Well Souled* team will be heading to Brazil, followed by Turkey, and finally, Vietnam. Why these countries in particular? “Well, they all hold a common allure. They really are future style influencers.”

As she prepares to leave, once again packing away the muscle-defining tome, she says: “The biggest thing with this project is reinforcing to the world all the beauty and opportunity here in South Africa. Yes, this country has its challenges, but every country has them – they can be overcome. We have to get this message out there.”



GHETTO FABULOUS: Nthato Mashishi