

# Acting with a mission

Although many in her community say she does not have a "proper" job, Grace Mahlaba does not care. Acting is her life. *Bobby Rodwell* chats to her

**G**race Mahlaba always wanted to be an actor. And, with lots of determination and hard work, she reached her goal.

Mahlaba believes actors are teachers too: "Theatre must educate people who are watching it. Actors are important teachers in society," she says.

On stage, TV and in the movies, she is always moving on to the next challenge.

Mahlaba, who lives in Alexandra, has been acting since she was a young girl. When she was only eight years old, she and a group of friends put on a play called "Umona". The play looked at people's greed in society. It was so popular that it ran for four years. People came to watch the play in schools and church halls all over the township. In 1977, the group was asked to put on the play at the Alexandra Stadium for the International Day of the Child.

When the young boy in the story left the production, Mahlaba changed her role from the old lady to the young boy.

"It was easy for me to do that because, even as a child, I believed that boys and girls should not be seen as different in what they are capable of doing," she adds.

"While I was growing up, my mother, Martha Mahlaba, believed my younger brothers should not do any house work. I had to do the cooking and cleaning when I returned home. While I respect my mother for raising us on her own when my father died, I taught my little brothers differently, and they cook and clean now.

"Women should have the choice to do anything they want to. If I wanted to be a bricklayer, I would have become one", says Mahlaba. But she always knew that she wanted to be an actor, and her mother gave her a lot of support.

"My mother wanted to be a singer but, before she knew it, she had two children, so all hopes of a singing career were gone. I think her situation



made me more determined to make my own life, and my own choices about what I wanted to do," Mahlaba told SPEAK.

Her ideas on the role of women have often put her into conflict with other members of her family. "Going into theatre is frowned upon in my community. Some members of my family think it has made me too independent. Like most young black women at that time, I was expected to become a nurse or a teacher," she says.

And, while Mahlaba has become a very successful actor, many people in her neighbourhood feel sorry for her.

"Shame, she does not have a proper job," she hears people whisper as she walks past.

In fact, her career has taken her to many different parts of the world, including Morocco in North Africa, where she acted in a film called, "Being Human". The film shows how little has changed in the relationship between men and women over the last 200 years. Mahlaba co-starred with Robin Williams and the film is expected to be screened in South Africa later this year.

**"**I enjoyed doing that film because it is a comedy and makes people laugh, but it will also make them think.

"As it is an American film, with part of it being made in Africa, I met people with different languages and cultures to my own."

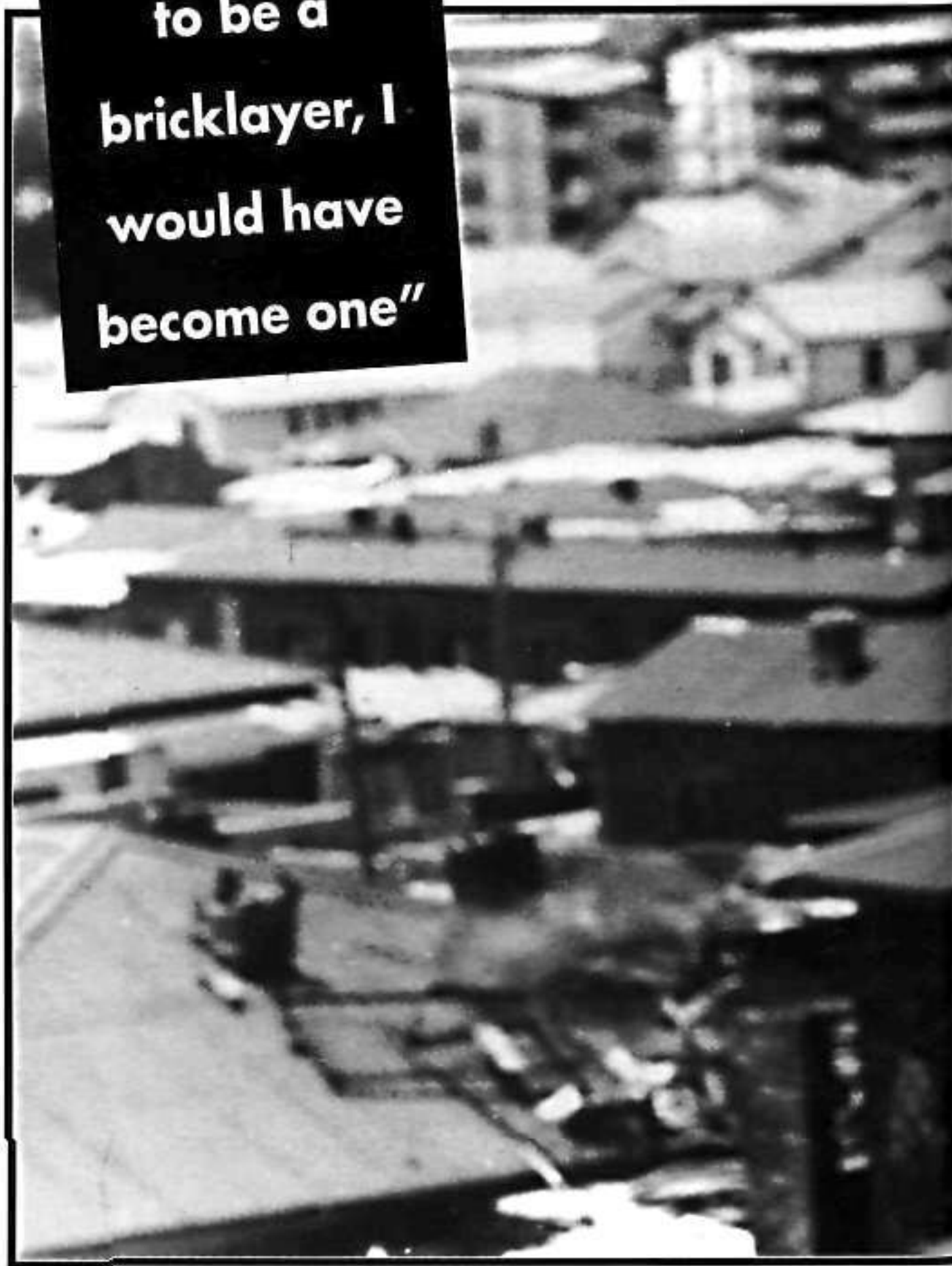
She was also met interesting people in Zimbabwe when she acted in the film "Bopha", in 1992.

"What I find exciting about

**"Women should have the choice to do anything they want to. If I wanted to be a bricklayer, I would have become one"**

my job as an actor, is that I get to travel and meet new people, and learn from new experiences. It is so important in life to learn new things that change the way we look at things," adds Mahlaba.

There is one thing that she believes should change in society in South Africa, and that is the practice of lobola. "I think it is very bad in terms of the image that it creates of women. Most



**Actor Mahlaba with Alexandra in the background: Just in South Africa, art and culture will always**



men believe that because they have paid lobola, they own their wives," says Mahlaba. "I think it is an outdated custom and would like to change it for myself. It adds to the dominant role men have in relationships.

**"B**esides, parents have to pay a lot of money to bring up their sons. Why don't the bride's parents pay lobola for them?"

she asks. "And why can't women propose marriage to men, why do they have to wait for the man to do it?"

Another issue Mahlaba feels very strongly about is language. "Apartheid has tried to destroy the richness of languages in South Africa. People in the Transvaal speak so many different languages, but if they do not speak English they are disempowered.

"Most books, films and plays are in English. This has to change. If a play is made for the stage or for television, it should be done in the language appropriate to the story."

Mahlaba speaks nine languages and is very proud of her knowledge of South African languages. In 1985, she had a part in the Sepedi television show, "Bophelo ke Semphekgo". It was very popular, and people in her community still call her "Mapholo", which was the name of her character. "Because it was in a South African language, people could relate to it," she says.

"As actors, there is a lot we can do to promote the use of the eleven official languages. It is an important part of change in South Africa.

**"A**ctors have never been respected and are paid low salaries, but there are so many ways in which we can bring about change in society. Just as cultural activities helped to bring about political change in South Africa, art and culture will always play a role in changing society. This is the role I see myself playing," adds Mahlaba.

Talking to her, it is easy to understand why she has challenged the role expected of her as a woman. Mahlaba has a clear idea of who she is and what she wants from life.

"Women must stand up and ask themselves if they are happy with their lives and what society expects from them. It is important that we continue to raise problems so that things will change, and we can live in a better society," adds Mahlaba. ☛



As cultural activities helped bring about political change, art and culture will always play a role in changing society in the future