

# PUTTING AFRICA ON THE MAP

Branding guru Thebe Ikalafeng has taken on his most ambitious project to date – rebranding the African continent

BY **MPHO TSHIKHUDO** PICTURES: **ER LOMBARD**

**H**E'S recognised as one of Africa's top marketing minds, so our expectations are high as we head to the Joburg north home of the man known as "Mr Brand".

But this guru is not your run of the mill suit, and we're soon put in our place.

"My home is all about authenticity, comfort, and warmth – it celebrates my travels and life experiences," explains Thebe Ikalafeng. "It's not about impressing anyone or about making a statement."

The lobby leads to an elegant living room that reflects his cosmopolitan African style. The life-sized paintings by leading African artists adorning the walls are testament to his identity,

celebrating Africa and the world.

The centrepiece is an upright piano. "That's not for décor," he quips. "The piano is here for a real purpose and function – to be played."

Sincerity is the name of the game. "I want to remain grounded," Thebe insists. "I'm just a township kid who's travelled to more than 50 countries around the world but still enjoys his privacy."

We settle in on the patio at the back of his house where Thebe regales us with stories of his childhood in Galeshewe, Kimberley, in the Northern Cape.

"Growing up I used to play the piano," says

**ABOVE: As Nike's marketing director for Africa, Thebe Ikalafeng quickly made a name for himself as an innovative global marketer.**

**RIGHT: He's the founder and managing director of Brand Leadership – the force behind the rebranding of Unisa, Transnet, SA Express, Prasa, the University of Botswana and other big projects in Africa.**

the internationally acclaimed author, advisor and speaker. "I studied the piano and violin and sang in a choir for a few years. I loved music in general, but I retired at the top of my game in both sports and music – at 18 and 14 respectively.

"I knew when I had reached the peak of my potential and had to move on to the next challenge – unlike many sports people," he jokes.

**ARMED** with a BSc and MBA from Marquette University in the US, Thebe's career started at Colgate-Palmolive in New York. He later





GROOMING: SEANI RAMAPHOSA

joined Nike as marketing director for Africa, where he built his reputation as one of the continent's foremost brand authorities before striking out into business for himself.

Brand Leadership, Thebe's hugely successful branding and marketing firm, celebrates 11 years this year. It has been the force behind some of the biggest rebranding projects in Africa, including Unisa, Transnet, SA Express, Prasa, the University of Botswana and the University of the Free State.

"The one thing I wanted to do when I moved out of the corporate world was to work on transformation that means something to the country and its citizens," says Thebe.

Working on huge projects such as Ghana's National Democratic Congress that needed a revamp after being voted out of government, as well as Brand Ghana, were two of his most challeng-

ing but fulfilling assignments. "Commercial brands come and go and they're easy to control," explains Thebe. "When it comes to branding people or a nation's ambition it requires a certain level of sensitivity, agility and visionary passion because every citizen is a customer and owner of the national brand."

**THEBE** also sits on several boards, including as a trustee at Brand South Africa, vice chair of Brand Council South Africa, and non-executive director for Mercantile Bank, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and South African Tourism.

We ask what he does when he's not working.

"When is that?" he laughs.

"I don't keep working hours; I keep passion hours. What I do for a living is not just a job. I consider it to be an extension or externalisation of who I am. I'm surrounded by inspiration and opportunity everywhere I go and inspiration doesn't keep office hours.

"On the rare occasion I'm not working, I sleep," he smiles. "I'm not interested in money because I don't think money should be a goal for me or anyone. Making money is easy, but making a difference and creating a legacy is hard. My goal is to be happy with the decisions I make every day, to make a difference and to sleep with both my eyes closed."

Thebe won't find much time for sleep as he's also trail-blazing across the continent as founder and chairman of Brand Africa, a non-profit initiative aiming to inspire Africa's growth, competitiveness and good reputation.

"What excites me now is not to put logos on cans but to see how I can be part of the journey to help Africa exceed its potential. That's where my energies are, that's where my passion lies – a better and winning Africa." With Thebe at the helm, the brand Africa looks set for success. ■

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**FROM LEFT:** Thebe's elegant, comfortable living room reflects his cosmopolitan style. African artefacts he collects on his frequent trips across the continent form an integral part of the décor.