

Super brand

Brand guru Thebe Ikalafeng thrills the scene on everything from Kimberly and personal branding to enemies and the Collagen Woman

IT's a lazy Sunday afternoon at Air Kiss Central — the lobby of The Michelangelo — and Johannesburg brand guru Thebe Ikalafeng is perched on a sofa. It's casual day. He's dressed in Diesel sweats, coming down off a mini-power shop at Fabiani. A peek into his shopping bag reveals the bright yellowing packaging of Aqua di Parma cologne. While he at first appears laid-back, it's soon obvious that his social radar is on "high alert".

And why not? Seems the Michelangelo is the new Hyatt — a few tables away is the former premier of the Northern Cape, Manne Dipico, who comes over to say "hi". A few minutes later the former deputy CEO of Vodacom, Andrew Mthembu, swings past to say hello, while Patrice Motsepe, Paul Diamond and a few others meet on neighbouring sofas after waving "hello". Everyone knows Ikalafeng, and Ikalafeng knows everyone. And I mean everyone, including the Collagen Woman.

"Oh, look," he says with a chuckle, "there's the Collagen Woman!" I glance around and, sure enough, my social radar picks her up - blonde, tanned, toned and collagened to within an inch of her well-nourished life. I've seen her around town, and *Style*'s social pages, for years. "You know her?" I ask. "Nah, I've just seen her around and am always intrigued by her collagen over-enhanced lips. After seeing someone a lot it's almost as if you do know them, even when you don't..."

Point. In that sense, Ikalafeng is a bit of an enigma. And it's something about which he's well aware. "I'm schizophrenic," he says. "On one hand, I'm a complete loner who enjoys "me time", getting lost in *The History Channel*, Media 24 online news and even Jerry Springer to unwind, alone. But when I leave home, I'm really out, sparing no energy. And that's pretty much my social philosophy — if you're going to leave your home, leave your troubles behind or don't bother leaving. The world doesn't deserve your negative attitude."

"I'm completely who I am," he says, "I have no interest in separating myself, so when I connect, I connect. It doesn't matter if someone's gay or straight, a black, politico, Jewish or Afrikaans. The relationships I have with individuals are based on individual dynamics. I see no need to drink or smoke because I feed off people's energies. Every single person knows something different about me. If I meet 10 people, I can virtually guarantee that each of them will know something unique about me — and me about them. It creates our unique bonds."

Not that he's a pushover. "I don't let my detractors' negative energy hinder me," he says, "and I keep the negativity between us without making others feel its brunt. The only person who'll know what's going on is the enemy. If it's a lingering scenario, like a dinner, I'll still go through the motions, but withhold gregariousness. It's who I call and choose to relate to frequently that really matters."

The Michelangelo is light years away from his Kimberly childhood. "Yep," he cheerfully admits, "when I was 14, I worked in white people's gardens for R2 a day. It wasn't because I had to. It's because I wanted to earn everything I had. My mother and grandmother never ever refused us anything we wanted. In fact I'd dare say for township kids, we were fairly content. We were by far the best dressed kids in our neighbourhood. The way it started is that I really wanted a camera and didn't want to ask my grandmother to buy it. I figured, I can work for it. And I got it. And when I was 16 I





Thebe Ikalafeng

Photograph by Jeanne-Claire Bischoff

worked at a furniture store, Klein Brothers, moving furniture around. I was once so tired I fell asleep in the storeroom and was locked in for part of the night. If the owner did not come around to check on the store, I'd have spent the whole night there!"

"Kimberly taught me independence, competitiveness and creativity, instilling in me the confidence that I could be anything I wanted to be," he says. "When I first came to Jo'burg, the Soweto kids would say 'You're a small-town boy, you'll never make it' but I just said 'Yeah, watch this space and let's talk later'. I first came here to study fashion design and ended up taking accounting at Wits; I could only see "CA" (Chartered Accountant) written all over my face!"

"Seems everyone has advice," he laughs. "When I first won a scholarship to Marquette University in Milwaukee, friends said, 'You'll regret the time you'll waste in the States. And then I met an old friend in Columbus, Ohio — a former classmate at Wits — who said 'I can tell you right now, you're not an accountant. You're a marketer. Why waste your time? Don't finish that degree. Rather, start a new one and enjoy it.' I started my first term in accounting by sitting in the front row, and sitting in the back row in the marketing lectures. Strangely enough, every term I'd move up one row in marketing and move back one row in accounting. By the end of my term there I graduated cum laude with specialisation in marketing and an award by the American Marketing Association for Aptitude and Excellence in Marketing."

Ikalafeng shot to fame as Nike's marketing director, a role he relished for the first five years. "In the sixth year, it became work. Until then we weren't "working" but rather simply living the brand, having fun, creating magic and success for the brand. Far from being a slouch, in my tenure there, we went from number three to number one, showing a 450% growth."

"Yet, in some ways, I was a misfit in the corporate world," he reflects. "But at the same time, it was also an incredible fit in that the organisation's entrepreneurial spirit and energy was tailor made to my and Nike's benefit."

Since then, Ikalafeng has started his own consultancy, Brand Leadership, while partnering with Two Tone Design to work on culturally defining brands like the Unisa merger, the national Coat of Arms and the Cradle of Humankind (in between private sector brands such as Apple, *Financial Mail*, *Business Day*, ABB and Afrox).

"My world is dominated by brands," he says, "at work and at home. I'm completing a doctorate at Unisa on how our perceptions as Africans influence our creation and consumption of brands — an academic African renaissance of some sort. I figured, having had a significant hand as the project leader and agency that created the total brand and identity of the institution, I may as well get a formal accreditation as a momento, albeit having to read for it — while at the same time trying to wrap up my book on personal branding called *Branded*. With personal branding, it's about how the individual fits into their world and their work environment..."

"I love working!" he laughs, "when people say, 'Why don't you take a break? Stop working for a bit!' I'm like 'Why don't you just ask me to stop breathing?' Work isn't draining to me — it's energising. And, if you don't love what you're doing, you shouldn't be doing it. Work should be an extension and expression of who you are. How can I take a break from being myself?"