

## HONORARY GRADUATE

### Es'kia Mphahlele

Es'kia Mphahlele has had a distinguished career in both the educational and creative writing fields. Born of humble parentage (his father a shop messenger, his mother a domestic worker) in Pretoria in 1919, he spent his early formative years with his grandmother in the countryside near Pietersburg, and then in Marabastad in Pretoria. The discovery when he was in standard six of a tattered copy of *Don Quixote* (he read it three times, until its pages fell out) was the early seminal influence that put him on the path of a literary career. In 1940 he qualified at Adams College as a teacher. Subsequently he obtained his matriculation as a private student.

From 1941 to 1945 Mphahlele taught at the Ezenzelezi Blind Institute in Roodepoort, before moving to a teaching post at Orlando High School. While there he published his first modest collection of short stories, *Man Must Live* (1946). In 1952 his chosen career track was cruelly terminated. He was dismissed and banned from teaching anywhere in South Africa for resisting and campaigning against Bantu education. Forty years later his insight and foresight can be seen to be vindicated.

Mphahlele joined *Drum* magazine in its heyday as its fiction editor and as a political reporter. He contributed a number of short stories to the magazine which was the most important mouthpiece for black political expression after the Second World War and played a significant role in nurturing the early black literary movement in South Africa. His contribution makes his name inseparable from that movement.

In 1957 Es'kia Mphahlele chose to go into exile, accepting a lectureship in English at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Until this time he had concentrated primarily on short stories because, as he put it, 'the distance between the ever-present stimulus and the anger was so short, the anger screamed for an outlet with such a burning urgency, that I had to find a prose medium that would get me to the focal point with only a few eloquent movements'. Having experienced 'the comedy and agony of exile', he chose the more extended form of the autobiography for his next book. *Down Second Avenue* drew on his early life both in traditional society and the slums of Pretoria and Johannesburg and became his most famous work. It is now a standard set-work in schools and many universities. Es'kia Mphahlele also played a significant role in cultural centres in Nigeria and in Kenya, where he lectured at the University of Nairobi.

After obtaining the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Denver, Mphahlele spent three years as Senior Lecturer at the University of Zambia. He returned to Denver as Associate Professor in English between 1970 and 1974, and his American career culminated in a full professorship at the University of Pennsylvania from 1974 to 1977. This period of twenty years' exile saw substantial intellectual production. His novels, *The Wanderers* (1971) and *Chirundu* (published in 1980 but written earlier), and his collection of short stories, *In Corner B* (1967), were joined by his oft-quoted, highly important books of literary criticism, *The African Image* (1962) and *Voices in the Whirlwind* (1972), as well as a number of significant anthologies and articles. For this corpus of distinguished publications, Mphahlele was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In 1977, Mphahlele returned to the country of his birth. Politics kept him from his first choice, heading the English Department of the University of the North. A number of prominent institutions offered him senior positions, but he made approaches to the University of the Witwatersrand. In consequence he joined its African Studies Institute as a Senior Research Fellow in 1979. In 1983 he became Professor of Literature and head of the newly founded Department of African Literature, and remained in that post until his retirement in 1989.

Since his return Mphahlele has continued to publish consistently. A collection of short stories, *The Unbroken Song* (1981), was followed by a sequel to *Down Second Avenue*, the autobiography, *Afrika My Music* (1981), as well as a novel for young readers, *Father Come Home* (1984). A selection of his letters, *Bury Me at the Marketplace*, was edited by Professor Chabani Manganyi and published in 1984. Professor Manganyi, a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the North, was also the author of a biography of Mphahlele entitled *Exiles and Homecomings*, published in 1983.

Es'kia Mphahlele is presently Chairman of the Council of the University of Venda and has received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Pennsylvania, Natal and Rhodes. He is one of the elder statesmen of South African literature.

The University of the Witwatersrand recognizes Es'kia Mphahlele's distinguished contribution in the fields of education and creative writing and is proud to be able to express its appreciation of the services of a man of such quality by conferring on him the highest honour at its disposal, the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.