

The untidy contradiction of strength and vulnerability



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The words of Mary Anne Chambers, Ontario Minister of Children and Youth Services, caught my attention as she spoke at a preview function recently for the film/ opera *the Passion of Winnie**. This Canadian production—celebrating the power of a single woman’s courage and determination to bring freedom to South Africa—reflected on the inspiring, yet tragic, life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela.

The Minister spoke about the relevance, in world terms, of a complex woman who battled courageously for 27 years to keep her incarcerated husband Nelson Mandela in the forefront of world consciousness. Others, many of them veterans of the anti-Apartheid struggle, spoke

movingly of how Winnie Mandela had earned the title “Mother of the Nation”, a vibrant symbol of hope and protection throughout the dark years of oppression. They cast her not as good or evil, but as a real and human combination of both.

As someone who grew up in South Africa and experienced first-hand the force of her charismatic personality, her huge grassroots support and the various scandals that have beset her, I was pleased to see that the production deals with the duality of who Ms. Madikizela-Mandela is and the events that continue to shape her turbulent life.

In Africa, the contradictory notion of subjugated women goes hand-in-hand with their revered status as inspirers, motivators and protectors. Alexander McCall Smith relayed this notion in quoting an old Setswana poem in *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*: “We are the ones that ploughed the earth when God made it...who made the food. We are the ones who look after men when they are little boys, when they are young men, and when they are about to die. We are always there. But we are just women, and nobody sees us.”

Is not this hidden power universally valid?

Women in powerful roles often overwhelm and intimidate men and women alike. Elizabeth I, Catherine De Medici, Cleopatra and Maria Callas, Margaret Thatcher, Oprah Winfrey, Hillary Clinton, are just a few names that spring to mind. Their greatest challenge is that those who recognize undeniable greatness seem, by and large, incapable of forgiving humanity in the objects of their admiration. They are held to a super-human yardstick, almost as if they are no longer allowed to be women.

I see everyday powerful women in the business world who, as leaders, arouse fierce and contradictory emotions in those around them. Scores of admirers, opportunists and hangers-on travel in their slipstream, yet oftentimes celebrate their

demise or even tear them down with savage exultance. The Carly Fiorina, Martha Stewart and Patricia Dunn sagas illustrate this point.

Powerful women seem to have a rare capacity to show vulnerability, and succeed in spite of it. Does this rebuke those who cannot? Are these women in turn validated, nurtured or comforted? Are they allowed, and do they always allow themselves, to retain this contradictory mix?

While many regard Ms. Mandela as a saintly activist, just as many regard her as an egotistical, power-hungry demon. For me, Mandela’s life—that abounds with contradictions: courage and fear, love and bitterness, adoration and hate, hope and despair—is as compelling as any of the famous opera figures we know so well. Norma, Tosca, Rosina, Medea and the like reflect similar stories of the ambivalence that inspires love and hate, loyalty and fear, admiration and resentment. Can we not help but subjectively wonder how we would manage such a life as hers? Was she shown enough empathy and compassion?

I regard women as the stronger of the human species because I have seen first-hand their unique ability to validate strength, passion and originality in others, while accepting weakness and quirks. I firmly believe that if people understood the value and importance of the ability to accept and work with ambiguity it would at once elucidate the value and importance of the contribution women bring to the business world.

In *the Passion of Winnie*, composer/conductor Bongani Ndodana-Breen and filmmaker/screenwriter Warren Wilensky have created a powerful and emotional piece that will resonate with anyone who identifies not only with the critical leadership role of women and the pursuit of freedom, but also the tremendous price that often has to be paid when women deploy excellence and passion in a public role.

*Please visit www.musicanoir.org for more details.