

Emotional Intelligence

Soul City, South Africa's wildly popular soap opera, spreads public-health messages across the continent

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IT'S 8:30 ON A TUESDAY NIGHT, AND MILLIONS of South Africans are tuning in to find out if the white social worker, Karen, will be able to adopt AIDS orphan Benni—"People who love me always end up dying," the child says. No, it's not *Melrose Place* or *E.R.* or any of the other imported dramatic series that fill the country's airwaves. It's a show about South Africans themselves. *Soul City*, the local soap opera that began as a good deed, is now an award-winning, multi-media business internationally recognized for its role in Third World development. It is also one of the top three most widely watched programs on South African TV.

which today include the European Union, Britain's Department for International Development, UNICEF, British Petroleum, the mobile-phone network MTN and the South African government's Department of Health—to put up the money, and *Soul City* was launched nationwide on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's TV service in 1994. "We realized that to be effective we had to go out at prime time, we had to keep it going and we had to be as good as or even better than any other production," says Japhet. Since then, *Soul City* has collected a bundle of prizes. On June 14, the show received a special award from Britain's One World Broadcasting Trust for its role in "illuminating the concerns of developing societies."

Africa's official languages, and the series is subtitled in English. It has been shown in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Namibia, Malawi and Barbados and has been dubbed into French and Portuguese for showing in Ivory Coast, Mozambique and other countries. "This concept has got legs," says Japhet. "It moves."

It has also spun off *Soul Buddyz*, a show for younger viewers, which began a 26-episode run on SABC-TV last year. Much as *Soul City* does for adults, *Soul Buddyz* looks at AIDS and other problems as they affect the young. The show is already being sought by countries outside South Africa.

What makes *Soul City* so successful is not merely its authentic portrayal of township life but also its intimacy with viewers. Many of the actors live in the townships. "That sometimes presents a problem," says Lebo Ramafoko, producer of the latest series. "Our actors are seen as real people. They have to become the advocates and counselors they portray on the screen." Some of the cast members have been discovered through *Soul City's* annual "Search for a Star" initiative. Among them



IT'S A WRAP: Actors on the set take a breather from filming after a successful take



HIGH DRAMA: Confronting prejudices toward HIV is one of *Soul City's* main objectives



EDUCATIONAL FOCUS: Benni tries his hand learning sign language at the township clinic

Soul City reflects the life and hard times of people in a typical South African urban black township. In fact, most of the series' location shots are taken in Alexandra, one of the oldest and most squalid of South Africa's black slums, just outside Johannesburg. And *Soul City's* clinic, where much of the drama is centered, is based on an actual clinic in Alexandra.

That medical theme is not surprising, since the idea for the show came from two young white South African doctors, Garth Japhet and Shereen Usdin, who had studied and worked in township hospitals and clinics, including in Alexandra. They envisioned a dramatic program that would highlight the social and health problems—particularly HIV-AIDS—in the townships. They convinced a long list of donors—

Because AIDS is a huge problem in South Africa—almost 10% of the population is infected with HIV—the subject is featured in every installment of the show. Other topics include violence against women, drunkenness, rape, child abuse, sexual conduct, occupational health, disability, setting up a business, even buying and selling a used car. "This is not just about reality in life, it's about real-life skills," says Japhet, who is executive director of the nongovernmental Institute for Health and Development Communications, which produces the show. *Soul City* also has a radio version broadcast daily in nine of South Africa's 11 official languages, as well as weekly newspaper columns and a series of educational booklets.

Characters speak in several of South

is Doreen Kotsedi-Pitse, a blind woman who will play the part of a radio talk-show coordinator. Kotsedi-Pitse lost her sight as a result of domestic violence, an issue frequently raised by *Soul City*. "It made us all aware how uncomfortably close we are to real life," says Ramafoko.

Soul City is affecting the way South Africans lead their real lives. A study sponsored by the E.U. says there is evidence that the program has played "a major role" in increasing public knowledge of HIV-AIDS and safer sexual behavior. Researchers say, for instance, that there is a "significant" association of the use of condoms with people who watch *Soul City*. The survey did not say whether Benni would find a happy new home. For more about that, tune in to next week's episode. ■