

SA ACTRESS CONFRONTS HER DEMONS OF DEPRESSION

In her frank account of her depression – undiagnosed for most of her life – actress Bonnie Henna provides a window on a disease that is still largely taboo, writes Helen Grange.

THE FIRST thing to strike me after scanning through Bonnie Henna's autobiography *Eyebags & Dimples* is how brave this 33-year-old woman must be, how difficult and searing the book must have been to write.

So it's the first enquiry I make when I meet her in Rosebank. She nods slowly and somberly, and seems to again feel the pain of the bitter soul-searching she engaged in, a process that took the past four years.

She's a well-known actress and recognised beauty, but she's exquisite when she cocks her head slightly and looks melancholic, which is ironic given that she has spent most of her adult life fighting off the demons of sadness and depression that her adoring TV fans could never have guessed at.

For those who need an introduction, Henna is best known for her roles as Ntombi in the SABC series *Home Affairs* and Zandi in *Backstage*.

She has also acted in TV series *Soul City*, *Gaz'lam* and *The Philanthropist*, and was more recently in e.tv's *Rhythm City*. Last year she made it to the top three in *Survivor Maldives* on SABC3, and has also starred in international films *Invictus*, *Drum* and *Catch a Fire*.

Born in Soweto, Henna was discovered at 13, at a bus stop on her way home from school, by an acting agent who got her her first job in TV, a series titled *Viva Families*. It offered a long-desired escape from her troubled home life, which is unflinchingly explored in her book, much of which revolves around her single working mother.

Henna's father, who people said she'd inherited her outstanding looks from, was attacked one night coming home from work and stabbed to death.

"I was five when my mother became suicidal. From then on the mood in our house was always sombre, the ambiance gloomy and void of hope. I spent much of my time feeling sorry for my mother, wishing I could take upon myself all the pain she was carrying, to spare her from the harshness of the world," she writes.

Beatings and disapproval, and worse, manipulative threats of suicide, define Henna's early memories of her mother, and those years were the most harrowing part of her story to recount.

Although not acknowledged or named back then, depression is what afflicted three generations of women in her family, she says.

She confesses that at the age of 11, her "childhood came to an abrupt end" when her mother locked herself in her bedroom after announcing to her three children that she would take her own life that night by drinking poison.

"It didn't matter that our mother eventually emerged from her bedroom in the morning. I had already let go of her, together with the girl child Bonnie," she writes.

Education, however, was always a priority for Henna's mother, who had her schooled at Greenside High. Church on Sundays was also a strict requirement, and today Henna is an active Christian with a strong faith, but for years it was lost to her, she says.

Having started her career in TV, she moved out of her mother's house and hit the Joburg party scene, drinking and smoking and living the high life. She got a



Bonnie Henna, who has launched her autobiography *Eyebags and Dimples*, was reminded of the view in the black community that depression is a white man's disease, when she received a Tweet to that effect recently.

PICTURE: MATTHEWS BALOYI

tattoo on her back, a tongue ring and a belly ring, and her hairstyle "fluctuated between peroxide blonde and completely bald". "Finally I was breaking out of my shell of isolation; I was determined to become a child of the world," she writes.

Yet she would erupt in anger at the slightest provocation, she says, and despite her increasing fame, "loneliness stuck like film to my skin".

Watching herself on *Technics Heart of*

the Beat was "incredibly difficult", she says, because "I was intensely self-critical and noticed every last tiny imperfection".

Fast-forward to today and she has lived a roller-coaster life since those heady days. She and her husband, fellow actor Sisanda Henna, lived for six months in Los Angeles, a time fraught with money problems, frustration and homesickness, but also a dawning

realisation that she needed help for her gloomy state of mind.

Henna was diagnosed with clinical depression in 2008 and by that time, she says, she was suffering panic attacks.

Her marriage looked headed for divorce, but still, her husband showed "infinite patience", she says.

"The trauma of my childhood had caused so much psychological and emotional damage that, over time, it

translated into physical symptoms, and insufficient serotonin was causing my clinical imbalance," she writes.

She explains the experience of depression. "I had no energy for anything. I was constantly anxious, with a feeling of hopelessness and being hunted down. Even during happy moments I'd have a feeling of impending doom. You can find ways to suppress it, but it is always gaining on you," she says.

As the psychologist explained the symptoms, Henna recognised every one of them in her own mother and in her grandmother, an alcoholic who died in her fifties.

"All the verbal, emotional and physical abuse Gogo had visited on my mother, my mother had then inflicted on me. Now that I held the baton, I could either pass it on or confront this monster and show him the abyss once and for all," she writes.

Henna was prescribed an antidepressant, which has changed her life. "The person you're meeting now is nothing like the person I was. It is like night and day," she says, adding that she has reduced the pills to half a day.

"After years of taking it, your body corrects itself. The time may come when I don't need to take it any more."

She is outspoken about the stigma still attached to depression, especially in black communities. She received a Tweet recently saying depression "is just a white disease".

"That's partly why I wrote this book. We've taken on so many aspects of Western culture, but we're not willing to deal with the stress that comes with it. I say, you don't need to suffer. Silence is not a virtue," she stresses.

From her dalliance with fame she's also learnt that while she loves the camera and acting has allowed her a much-needed escape, it's an unreal world that shouldn't define who she is.

"Regarding celebrities, I've always found it strange to want to be worshipped. Don't put me on a pedestal, because when I step off it, I have clay feet like everyone else," she laughs.

Today Henna lives with her two boys, aged three and two, in a townhouse complex in Cape Town's Hout Bay (her husband is still based in Joburg), which she jokingly calls "a drinking village with a fishing problem".

"I love the quality of life in Cape Town, to be able to walk on the beach and take in the beauty of the place. I'm inspired by beauty. It needs to be my home for ever," she says.

Henna says in her book that she has been able to "mend bridges with my beloved mother".

"Becoming a mother myself has opened a whole new understanding of her challenges and the position she found herself in all those years ago," she writes.

What does she see in her future, I ask her. "I'm a visionary. I want to change the world. I want to find a better way and for it to benefit millions," she replies.

With this courageous book, she has made a good start. **● *Eyebags & Dimples* (Jacana Media) is available at Exclusive Books at R195.**

NEED HELP?

○ SA Depression and Anxiety Group: Call 011 262 6396 for a counsellor.
○ Suicide hotline: 0800 56 75 67.