



STRETCHING THE

Photography: Desmond Louw

What started as a childhood hobby has turned into a life-changing career opportunity for one 18-year-old, writes NICK DALL

POSSIBILITIES

'm a self-taught contortionist from Worcester,' says 18-year-old Inathi Zungule, describing the day, seven years ago, when she first discovered her talent. 'There was gymnastics on the TV – I think it must have been the Olympics – and I just couldn't take my eyes off it.'

Sitting cross-legged in tracksuit pants and a tank top, on the turquoise sponge floor of the brand-new Zip Zap Academy in Salt River, she looks like any other teenager.

'I tried to copy what they were doing,' she laughs. 'I did the splits the first time I tried.' Then she moved on to handstands – also child's play. Over the next few months she stretched her body to new limits, using beds and chairs as props. 'None of my sisters are any good. I tried to teach them, but they don't like it and they're not flexible. I don't know where I get it from...'

It's 11 o'clock on a Friday morning and Cape Town is gripped by an unseasonable heatwave. An unventilated circus tent is probably the last place I want to be, but this is all forgotten when a tribal beat fills the air and Inathi takes the stage. Surrounded, shadowed, worshipped by six male subjects, she overpowers them all with her intense gaze and warrior body language.

As the drums reach a crescendo she is lifted on to a hanging hoop and hoisted skywards. There she performs all manner of tricks, twists and turns without ever breaking her stare. At one point it seems as her head is glued to one ankle while her other leg is thrust perpendicularly behind her. 'I'm focusing on aerial these days,' she tells me later. 'With a bit of contortion thrown in.'

A few acts later, Inathi is back on stage – this time in bright red overalls. Again, she's the only girl in the group. But for this feelgood dance number the nervous

intensity has been replaced with a massive smile and sparkling eyes.

If her uncle hadn't seen a Facebook post about the Zip Zap Circus School, she might never have got to experience any of this. He made a few calls and, sometime in 2015, Inathi and her mom went to Cape Town for an audition. 'I did some basic contortion tricks and a few chinstands,' she remembers. 'They didn't say anything when I finished. There's a waiting list, you know.'

After performing for about five minutes she headed back to Worcester and carried on with high school. 'But I didn't forget about the circus.' Instead, she kept up her training – always alone, and only at home. 'None of my friends knew about it.'

Then, a year later, her mom's phone rang. Would she like to join the Simunye Programme at Zip Zap? 'They hadn't forgotten about me!' she laughs. There was only one problem. Classes took place twice a week in Cape Town – 120 kilometres away.

Most 15-year-olds would probably have grudgingly declined, but Inathi was not most 15-year-olds. Every Friday and Saturday for two years, she woke at 3am, got a lift to the train station with her mom, paid the R32 for a round-trip ticket, and boarded the 04.40 to Cape Town – there's only one train a day from Worcester. She listened to her iPod to stay awake for the duration of the three-and-a-half-hour journey. After a four-hour session at the Zip Zap Dome, she'd walk back to Cape Town Station and catch the 16.41 train back to Worcester. The next morning she'd do it all again. Did she ever miss a class? 'Only if I had an exam at school.'

Once she joined Zip Zap she could no longer keep her hobby a secret. When her teachers asked her to perform she agreed – as long as they paid her. R350 later – that's ten train trips – she found herself onstage during the school fashion show in 2016. The whole ☺

AIR AFFAIR

Inathi Zungule (left) is focusing on aerial; downtime for Dshamilija Liess and Inathi (middle); Inathi performs on the lyra ring





school was spellbound as she went through her acrobatic contortion routine. ‘My friends couldn’t believe I had this skill,’ she remembers. ‘I had to pose for loads of pictures afterwards.’

At the start of 2018, Inathi joined Dare to Dream, the four-year, full-time vocational programme for children who want to make a career out of the circus. She said goodbye to her family in Worcester and moved into the Zip Zap Academy, where she shares a dorm room with Dshamilija Liess, an intern from Germany. ‘It was my first time living away from home but I already knew about five people when I arrived,’ says Inathi. ‘I was a bit sad for a while... homesick, I guess. But you get used to it.’

She’s only been back to Worcester twice (not on the train!) and in August 2018 her mother and her uncle came to Cape Town to see her big stage debut in *The Journey Beyond* at the Artscape Opera House. ‘Yoh, it was amazing,’ says mum Xoliswa, over the phone from Worcester. ‘I was screaming so loud and clapping too much.’ When Inathi first started doing contortion, Xoliswa was ‘happy for her because she liked it’ but it never her crossed her mind that her daughter could ever make a career out of her curious hobby.

When the Zip Zap opportunity came up, she was adamant that her daughter should grab it with both hands feet. As a young girl, Xoliswa had been an aspiring ballet dancer (she was in the same class as South African music legend, Brenda Fassie) but when she left Cape Town for Worcester the opportunities slipped away. ‘Go to Cape Town,’ she urged. ‘It will never happen if you stay in Worcester.’

What does her life in Cape Town look like for Inathi? Five days a week she wakes about 9am, has a shower and a bowl of cornflakes, and heads to class. The line-up varies from day to day – ‘sometimes we do a bit of circus history or computers, other times we train the whole day’ – and a variety of teachers comes in to teach classes. The students spend time practising their acts (they’re always working on more than one) and doing general strength training.

Lunch is a help-yourself affair and a much-needed chance to relax (Inathi usually goes to the Academy’s braai area for some fresh air) ahead of four more hours of classes. After finishing at 6pm, Inathi heads to a gym around the corner to lift weights. ‘You need strong arms for aerial,’ she explains. After dinner – the one meal at which all 14 housemates eat together – she watches movies on her phone (favourites include *Titanic* and *The Game Plan*) in her room, or Whatsapps her mother and four sisters. On Fridays and Saturdays, she and the other Dare to Dream students give back by teaching children in the Beginners and Simunye classes. Sunday is a well-earned day of rest. Unless she’s performing, of course.

‘When I heard about this girl who was coming all the way from Worcester just to attend classes,’ says Brent van Rensburg, the former flying trapeze artist who co-founded Zip Zap, ‘I was blown away.’ Anyone who was prepared to make this kind of effort, he figured, really wanted to be here. ‘I didn’t think she could sustain it... But she just kept coming. It’s insane.’

When Brent was told that she wanted to join Dare to Dream, he was ecstatic. ‘With that kind of determination, we had to give her a chance.’ A relative lack of training and experience means she’s ‘playing catch up’ on the technical side of circus. But her determination and drive can’t be bought. ‘She’s amazing. Absolutely amazing. This is a life calling for her.’

Several Zip Zap graduates have gone on to have successful careers in Europe, but Inathi is not getting ahead of herself. ‘I’ve still got three more years here,’ she says, ‘and a lot to learn.’

After that? ‘I’d love to travel... but not forever...’ ■

JUGGLING ACT

Aviwe Mfundisi (opposite) learnt to do flik flaks in the fields of Khayelitsha. Matthew Risk (left) and Ayanda Nombelwu perform in *Cirque My Ride*



British Airways flies daily to Cape Town from Jo’burg, Durban, PE and London.



GET INVOLVED

Founded in 1992 by Brent van Rensburg and his wife and former trapeze partner Laurence Estève, Zip Zap is a ‘social circus’ with a goal to ‘inspire young people and help build a new culture of peaceful coexistence in South Africa’.

Thanks to funding from various donors, all Zip Zap’s children’s programmes are free for all participants. All the children have to bring is a whole lot of dedication.

Beginners classes are open to anyone aged between seven and 12 and take place on Saturday mornings at the Zip Zap Academy. Intermediate classes (on Friday afternoons) are available for eight- to 15-year-olds who have mastered the basics.

Zip Zap puts on regular performances, at the Zip Zap Dome and at other

venues such as the Artscape Opera House and the V&A Waterfront. The lineup is on the website (zip-zap.co.za/zip-zap-productions).

The circus is giving free performances at the Amphitheatre at the V&A Waterfront at 5pm daily, 2-8 January (waterfront.co.za).

In conjunction with early childhood development centres, clinics and foster homes, Zip Zap runs several social outreach programmes in underprivileged areas of Cape Town (zip-zap.co.za/social-outreach).

Simunye is aimed at kids who are contemplating a career in the circus. Classes are at the Zip Zap Dome every Friday and Saturday. Dare to Dream is what Inathi is doing now – eating, breathing and sleeping circus.