

Funny bones

Maria McCloy on *iMumbo Jumbo*

I *MUMBO JUMBO* is leaving festival-goers awestruck. Last year, Brett Bailey's *Zombie* was one of the few innovative things happening at the festival. This year Bailey has enough of a budget to pay people, and they are on the main programme — and he says he is surprised at how popular the new play is proving.

Who could not be awed, or even vaguely interested, in *iMumbo Jumbo*, a play that uses a real-life story? Last year, Chief Nicholas Gcaleka, saying he was guided by dreams, went on a quest to Scotland to find the head of his great-great uncle, King Hintsa, who is said to have been beheaded while fleeing from the British in 1836.

Gcaleka believes that only when the skull is returned to the body and the ancestral spirit is laid to rest in South Africa, will there be an end to corruption and violence and to what the actor who plays Nicholas Gcaleka describes as “people fucking their grandmothers”.

So the play — the programme invites the audience to participate in a “ceremony” — depicts Gcaleka's journey to Scotland, using Xhosa song, dance, instruments, clothes and

rituals. The cast includes 10 sangomas.

People are referring to it as a “breakthrough”, as “groundbreaking”, because they sure as hell haven't seen anything like it in theatre before.

It was great to walk into a play about Xhosa history, kings and tradition in a town that still worships England. And the visual effects are stunning: the background is made of Jungle Oats packs and Queen Elizabeth is played by a traditionally dressed actor holding a porcelain dog; Coca-Cola culture and US imperialism are brought to life by Coke poured and handed to members of the audience.

Bailey doesn't put any of his ideas and scepticism about Gcaleka into the mix — it's a story told from Gcaleka's point of view. But the way all sorts of questions are worked into the show is through using “the bunfight theatre company”. The cast workshopped and from there interesting questions and contradictions are examined.

What is also looked at is the contradiction between spiritual beliefs and science and Christianity: some traditional leaders have been dismissive of Gcaleka's claim that he was led to the buried skull in dreams; they sent the skull he brought back from Inverness for DNA testing — and now it is claimed that the skull is actually that of a woman.