

Spellbinding African theatre

Diane de Beer

"Bring all those people who are emigrating to New Zealand and Australia," said one enthusiast after witnessing this celebration of South African theatre, "because this has everything that I love about Africa".

And that just about sums up Brett Bailey's explosive collision of cultures in our Third World Country. He creates theatre that sweeps you along on the journey of Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka who was led by a vision to go on an ancestral search to Britian to recover the head of Chief Hintska killed by a Colonial posse in 1838 and so bring peace to his country.

This is theatre of the imagination which leads you into an unfamiliar yet recognisable world of rituals, spirits, sangomas, prophets, angels, scientists, chiefs and queens while heightening the struggle between African beliefs and Western influences.

Bailey never takes sides and yet his satire is scathing as he intertwines colonial images and African ritual. A chorus of Xhosa chiefs are reminiscent of a Noel Coward tableau with the actors hilariously imitating the stiffness and formality of a period play. But then the sangomas take command and the theatre is rhythmically swept along in a ritual in which the audience become participants.

You are always kept on the edge of your seat as the story is stopped quite startlingly to inquire whether everyone is having a good time. Actors move in and off the stage using the Market Theatre from all sides as they run down the stairs, take seats between their performances and draw

PLAY
iMumbo Jumbo
DEvised, DESIGNED AND DIRECTED
Brett Bailey
CAST
Performed by the Third World Bunfight including adult and child actors, sangomas and the choir of St John's Apostolic Church
VENUE
The Market Theatre
DATES
Until December 20

the story's dramatic flow. The stage is drawn almost like a circus ring with the backdrop a brilliant wallpapering of red and white Punch washing powder boxes. At the back all the alcoves are used to dramatic effect throughout the proceedings and with a cast as large as this one, you're never able to catch

all the nuances that are unfolding, not only on centre stage but thrown at you from all angles.

The focus shifts constantly not only in the text but also in magnitude as the stage is drawn wider and smaller to capture the action and the context. You have to have your wits about you and yet, this is theatre that simply grabs at all your sense and never lets go.

"It's important that our children learn about their traditions," shouts Chief Gcaleka at one point. And throughout the play there's a passionate plea to allow for the dreams and visions of all peoples to flourish.

iMumbo Jumbo subtitled *Days of Miracle and Wonder* is theatre that excites with a vibrant African energy as it takes you to a place that you have heard of but don't really know - and yet once you get there, you feel totally at home.

If you want to see the future of theatre, spellbinding storytelling mixed magically with African ritual as the past and present are blended together, *iMumbo* does all that. It's an invigorating celebration of the riches the cultures of this country has to offer.

And yes, they do make the spirit