

iMumbo Jumbo opts for a selective reality in devising theatre for the millennium

After *iMumbo Jumbo* - *The Days of Miracle and Wonder*, South African culture is no longer travelling a one-way street. Here is an astonishing watershed work that grabs our fundamental cultural differences by the throat, beginning the vital process of exporting images and ideas to tell the First World not only what we think of ourselves but of it as well.

Based on Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka's quest to find the skull of the 19th-century Xhosa paramount chief, King Hintsa kaPhalo, *iMumbo Jumbo* is as powerful an anti-colonial statement as any I have seen on stage. Colonialism denies the truth of the colonised, whose ideas and beliefs are not granted legitimacy. Here, Xhosa spirituality is the chief tenet of the work.

Gcaleka, a sangoma and a Christian priest, went to Britain last year to remove Hintsa's skull. Its separation from the chief's body was the reason for murder and rape in our society, he averred, and only by reuniting it

with the remains of Hintsa's body would violence be reduced.

Typically, the media portrayed Gcaleka as a screwball, a short-term curiosity in the gallery of the grotesque and bizarre. Those good old colonial chaps at Sky covered the story with a combination of imperial condescension, parochial curiosity and ignorant anthropological speculation. They got their come-uppances here, lampooned with vigour.

In reality, the media manipulation of the Gcaleka story met with some cunning and expedient manipulation of the media by the chief himself. That's not addressed because *iMumbo Jumbo* operates as a hermetically sealed reality, true within itself.

The audience has to take what may be an alien and unpalatable reality as fact. That is part of the genius of *iMumbo Jumbo*, but also what may give rise to controversy because liberals - real crypto or that quaintest of subcategories, conservative - will be troubled by such a highly selective version of reality and truth.

They will not be the only ones discomfited. Theatregoers brought up in the Judaeo-Christian tradition will be jolted out of their comfort zones by this alternative system of worship and world view. Their glib response - defence might be more accurate - might be to brand *iMumbo Jumbo* as irrational.

Liberal and religious reactions have been anticipated by Brett Bailey, the 30-year-old who researched and created the work in conjunction with the cast of sangomas, choristers and actors - many of them first-time.

He provides two significant pointers in the programme to what *iMumbo Jumbo* is trying to achieve.

The first by Jungian disciple Dr Vera Buhmann, says "...what appears to be irrational is really symbolic and mythical and portrays the lawfulness of the collective psyche".

The second, from an obscure book on millenarian cults, says: "If we stand on the believer's ground, accept the revelation, the prophet, and the assorted rites and activities as

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guaranteeing the truth of things, and then attempt to find out what kinds of truth they reveal, we may advance our understanding of the kinds of truth that are revealed."

In other words, *iMumbo Jumbo* is discovery and therapy for the nation. It serves up a raw reality, inviting our minds, hearts and souls to make the links they would seek to deny. To ar-

nive at "the truth", we must see how different realities are linked.

Much of what we are invited to see is frightening. Most disturbing is the visceral misogyny and insidious menace that pervade the play, but then Bailey is not playing. He doesn't pander to sensibilities, instead suggesting that this is the state of the nation and we had better get with it.

There is one subtle and supreme irony, however. *iMumbo Jumbo* reveals unpalatable realities, hoping to open up minds rather than narrow them. But it does so by itself denying one unpalatable reality: that forensic scientists decreed that the skull found by Gcaleka was not Hintsa's.

It's true that Bailey invites us to stand on believer's ground and accept Gcaleka's revelation. But it is in this particular sense that *iMumbo Jumbo* is anti-thought, though that is admittedly the harshest way of putting it. At its best, it is truly new and genuinely South African theatre for the next millennium.

The worst piece of anti-thought on

the cultural scene this week is *Contact*, the movie based on the late Carl Sagan's book of that name.

On screen, *Contact* remains a Sagan wet dream: a fanciful answer to the celestial whodunnit. When Jodie Foster's scientist makes contact with aliens, it's on an idyllic beach with their representative in the guise of her long-dead father. This is not so much about extending the frontiers of science and knowledge, but about extending the frontiers of schmaltz.

Treacle abounds. On her way to the star Vega, Jodie becomes all goldfish-like as she peers out at the beauty of the cosmos. "They should have sent a poet, not a scientist. I don't have the words," she says, mouth gaping and tears welling.

Poor Jodie. Her director, Robert Zemeckis, the creator of the reactionary *Forrest Gump*, is an old hand at melodrama. He must have enjoyed the screenplay's romance between Jodie and Matthew McConaughey's charismatic religious leader. That even threatens to stop her going off

into the wild blue yonder: can't let the secret of the universe get in the way of romance, now can we?

But the worst aspect of *Contact* is its dumbing down. While spirituality coherently provides the ground rules in *iMumbo Jumbo*, in *Contact* it serves as a coward's escape. Protestant righteousness wins the day as Zemeckis dogs Christian virtues for all they're worth.

There is an irony here, too. Zemeckis appropriates two pieces of CNN footage of Bill Clinton addressing the media and inserts them into the movie, apparently fitting perfectly to the context. Except that in the second, Clinton is talking in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. Clearly Zemeckis has a selective understanding of Christian morality.

It's a despicable moment in a disgustingly manipulative movie. If you're looking for real *iMumbo Jumbo*, you'll find it in *Contact*.

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