

# An intoxicating whiff of the pointedly irrational

The play *iMumbo Jumbo*, directed by Brett Bailey, and the poems of Gert Vlok Nel reassert the artist's right to eclecticism

Often, the really interesting art of this country comes from the country, not the metropolis. It has a boldness born of not looking over shoulders to conform and of courage; a technical audacity; and in the case of *iMumbo Jumbo* (at the Market) and Gert Vlok Nel's poetry, certain conservatism.

*iMumbo Jumbo*, directed with great skill by Brett Bailey, and Nel's poetry alike are fascinating and vigorous.

This is mainly because of their formal audacity and an instability of theme. Both plays and poems resist the notion of art as a made thing referring to the world. Rather they create their own persuasive world, insisting on the work of art as an act.

The works are arenas where things happen: different voices are heard, different conventions of speaking to the audience and reader are used. *iMumbo Jumbo* has characters relating to each other and also stepping out of the stage to address the audience directly: the work is a mixture of lecture, sermon, consciousness-raising, propaganda and narrative. It's done in a bright,

superbly crafted replica of a painting, one of those African murals with bright, dense detail: the characters are like a frieze come alive.

The work is ostensibly about the quest by Chief Nicholas Gcaleka for the skull, taken by Scots soldiers, of his ancestor Paramount Chief Hintsisa.

The absence of the skull, it is sug-

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gested, is why South Africa is on a slippery crime-ridden path to civil perdition. Gcaleka, who appears in the play as himself, found a skull, which scientists pronounced as that of a 17th-century Scots nanny.

Xhosa chiefs denigrated the find. However, the gulf between belief and fact, myth and reality, dream and event is brushed aside by the chief.

He simply denounces the chiefs as hirelings of civil society; the scien-

tists as white ignoramuses. He makes a pitch for funds to bring children to the theatre and humanity to return to the old gods. The whiff of Elmer Gantry is unmistakable. It is this that is troubling about *iMumbo Jumbo*.

Underlying this passionate work is an attack on rationality in the South African state. The work appeals to the gut rather than the head and in the theatre, with its revivalism and dance, the intoxicating fumes of burning herbs, one has a profound sense of a neglected way of seeing and experiencing.

The play comes from a world of spirits, not plans and policies: from the world of a savage god. It has a visceral, demagogic appeal to the powerless, the marginalised, the rural conservatives.

*iMumbo Jumbo* has the seductiveness of the sensual, simple truth. It's a rich reminder of volatile forces that cannot be reasoned away. It eschews such niceties as debate, brushes aside unlikelynesses, demands that the audience sing, dance and pray in the theatre and reminds us that the society of the waBerzi is not the whole truth of the new South Africa.

That's useful. But it is illiberal theatre, not tolerating dissent or the entry of the uncomfortable fact, except to trash it. That bothered me.

Gert Vlok Nel's *Om te lewe is onnatuurlik* (Tafelberg 1993) won the Ingrid Jonker prize. Then working as a security guard at Stellenbosch University, Nel became a sensation in first the Afrikaans and then the

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broader literary world. The Beaufort West-born man writes witty, cunning poetry in which things happen, like *iMumbo Jumbo*. It uses the formal insights of *The Waste Land*, which have been scrupulously overlooked by the English establishment. The poems are cut cinematically and use a melange of languages and styles. The narrator moves in and out of the frame, wittily commenting on what the poems depict.

They're funny: warm, colloquial

and rich, with a coruscated surface, an often antagonistic interplay between form and content. Nel performed them at Jargonelle's club in Brixton, Johannesburg, with his brother, clad in grey shoes, face shyly turned from the audience.

Nel also sings, in the hypnotic monotones of Dylan or Leonard Cohen. His poems create a world distinct from the obsessive public concerns of the new South Africa, asserting the importance of the individual experience and the tapestry of events that comprise it. In that way, they are subversive: they refuse to be bound by conventional wisdoms, resist the public rhetoric, and affirm the right of the artist to eclecticism.

*Bouncers*, by John Godber, at the Johannesburg Civic, is set in *laager*-lout country, with the sinuous menace of dark clubs, backyard seductions and suppressed violence. We've been there before but what is notable about Johnny Barubozon's production is it's played mainly by third-year Wits drama students.

It's a chill production with sudden explosions of violence and abrupt shifts of tone, performed by the cast with muscular power.



The vital *iMumbo Jumbo*, depicting the quest for the skull of Chief Hintsisa by his descendant, Chief Gcaleka, is playing at the Market