

OPINION



Marketable Market's miracle

The complex remains at theatre's cutting edge, writes Darryl Accone

CULTURE COUNTS

The miracle of the Market Theatre is not so much that it has just turned 21, but that it got off the ground at all.

It was in 1976, that *annus mirabilis* of the struggle against apartheid, that work began on converting the so-called Indian Fruit Market in Newtown into a theatre complex. Against a backdrop of burning schools and police brutality in Soweto, Barney Simon and Mannie Manim led an intrepid group on a brick-by-brick building mission. They were believers in the power of culture to explain, to transform and to heal.

At the Market's recent birthday celebration, Manim remembered the ordinary people, young and old, who had sent crumpled rand notes with letters saying they would like to help in the adventure. One rand paid for one brick. As both Manim and Market executive director John Kani emphasised, the theatre – and South African culture – owe a huge debt to those thousands of people around the world, at least as large a debt as to the multinational conglomerates who have supported it.

Visionary individuals banding together in a collective spirit of possibil-

ity is what sets the Market apart, not only in theatre, but in the rapacious commercialism that increasingly characterises our national life. For the Market is a declaration of faith in intangible returns, the sorts of dividends and added values that do not present themselves banally on the bottom line of some beancounter's balance sheet.

It's true that the Market's artistic policy went through a bit of a wobbly period in the early and mid-nineties, but despite the flak it has drawn in our post-election cultural confusion, it remains at the cutting edge.

Sceptics are advised to see *iMumbo Jumbo – The Days of Miracle and Wonder*, now on the theatre's main stage, for proof. It's based on, inspired by and – it must be said – selectively extrapolated from, Chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka's quest last year to find the skull of King Hintska kaPhalo, 19th century paramount chief of the amaXhosa.

It is a startling work, heralding nothing less than a new and thoroughly appropriate form of theatre for this country.

Those of Waspish inclination, for

whom theatre betokens an evening with the familiar – words, characterisation and motivation, all neatly framed by a proscenium arch – will be shocked. It's not that *iMumbo Jumbo* eschews such basic story-telling features, but that it does what so much wordy theatre seems incapable of achieving these days: open up new, hitherto unthought-of worlds.

The shock of the new – which ought to be invigorating but is too often met with resistance here – will not be confined to such theatregoers. At least as deeply affected will be those accustomed to Christianity being a reverential, untouchable underpinning of drama. *iMumbo Jumbo* might be construed as blasphemous and pagan, revealing the machinations of alien beliefs and cultures.

Good. That is exactly what we need in the real South Africa, whose polyglot composition does not even begin to reflect its multiculturalism.

Only out of the collision and subsequent interaction of our many beliefs will emerge some sort of understanding about who and what we are as South Africans. That is almost the artistic manifesto of the theatre group behind *iMumbo Jumbo*, the wittily and point-

edly named Third World Bunfight, so it's no surprise the play is a fascinating duality of African and Judaeo-Christian spirituality.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* pointed to the arrival of Christian missionaries in Africa as the beginning of what seemed to him then the irreversible destruction of African culture, religion and civilisation.

Decades later, *iMumbo Jumbo* posits an altogether different, far more sanguine, scenario. The hybridisation of systems of belief, embodied in the beguiling figure of Gcaleka, shows how the indigenous has absorbed the imported.

Perhaps that should not surprise us as much as it does. Their common ground is large, because the spiritualities are esoteric and both are exotic when viewed through a rational lens. The empiricist and the scientist will not find much joy in *iMumbo Jumbo*, which asks its audiences to examine the world in less measurable ways.

Bailey and his co-creators – an astonishingly eclectic collection of sango-mas, Christian church choristers and

unblooded actors – invite us into this arcane world where the specific realities and selective versions of reality are foreign to us, but the belief in them shown by the characters is no less profound than the faith we invest in ideas dear to us.

It is this exercise that is so captivating and remarkable. Art should take us on journeys into the unknown, opening up new horizons.

That sounds like the artsy-fartsy equivalent of bunny-hugging. It is. And it's vital in a country where what is real has always been equated only with what is measurable.

Looking at the world that way – as a repetitive, inescapable cycle of mere production and consumption – is to allow the principle of everyday entropy to triumph.

In the way of the finest cultural inspirations and articulations, *iMumbo Jumbo* forcefully reminds us of the richness and versatility of reality. And most significantly, the act of faith of its creation is akin to the spirit which begat the Market Theatre.

■ *Darryl Accone is the editor of The Star Tonight. Culture Counts will appear every fortnight.*