

Nostalgic Return of the Ancestors

By [Hugh Shankland](#) 11 Nov 2014

If you're looking to shrug off the discontents of winter and enjoy a good laugh at the foibles of humanity as revealed through the ironies of our national political farce, Mike van Graan's *Return of the Ancestors* may be for you.

A relentless catalogue of the ills of contemporary South Africa and a bitter litany denouncing the failure of government to heal, or even vigorously to address, these multiple insults to the social body, the play is a *tour de force* of versatile and vigorous acting from Mandisi Arnold Sindo and Siya Sikawuti, and clear and elegant direction from Mdu Kweyama. It is a feast of clever, funny writing.

Return of the Ancestors genuflects to the South African classic *Woza Albert*, in which Jesus returns to South Africa during the apartheid era. In *Return of the Ancestors*, the Council of Ancestors decides to send a two person delegation - Steve Biko and Neil Aggett - back to South Africa during its 20th year of democracy to see if the sacrifices of those who were killed in the struggle against apartheid had been worth it. Biko and Aggett travel through the country, having a variety of encounters with living and inanimate objects along the way to Nkandla, where the major celebration of the benefits of democracy will take place.

It's the function of satire to expose wounds, opening the way to social healing. The alternative is apathy and despair. Sadly, Van Graan's solution seems nostalgic rather than transformative.



Different survivors

The play suggests that if only different leaders of the struggle had triumphed, we would not now be mired in corruption. The unrelenting greed that grows our economy and fouls our nest might have been curtailed. If the likes of Steve Biko and Neil Aggett had survived we might be on the verge of liberation.

It's no longer news to anyone that "Power corrupts...", but we are in dire need of living contradictions to this cynical wisdom rather than romantic longing for what might have been. Mandela bore the sole burden of the proof for long enough.

Where are the contemporary heroes that hold out the promise of freedom from this plague of corruption? When will we rise above the culture of complaint founded in our sense of exceptionalism and entitlement,

and look beyond our borders for new socio-economic models?

The answers to the questions raised by this incisive satire will certainly not come from our gutted monopol media. As the play illustrates, the good news is little more than a positive spin on the bad.

Satire is little more than the flea on the rogue elephant and, with luck, will find the right orifice to drive the creature mad. This play may not be the thing to catch the conscience of the media conglomerates, but it suggests that that we still have some space for dissent. In a culture in which critical reviews are treasonable offences on the grounds of being bad for business, this offers some measure of comfort.

After the show an epilogue of sorts took place out on the street. An articulate car guard reiterated much of the bad news in the play. He then went on to suggest that what we really need is a role model, such as the President of Uruguay, who shuns self-aggrandisement and continues to work as a farmer, lives in his humble home instead of a palace and drives an old Volkswagen rather than a Mercedes. Indeed!

Return of the Ancestors runs until 15 November at the Artscape Arena Theatre and forms part of The Artscape Spring Drama Season. Book at [Computicket](#).

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