

From psycho biography to Mbeki's balls

The launch of Mark Gevisser's book on the president had its priceless moments, writes **Jeremy Gordin**

When I saw that the Wits Great Hall was the venue for the launch of Mark Gevisser's biography of President Thabo Mbeki, I feared that Gevisser and his publisher might be being a trifle overambitious.

But on Monday evening, standing at the doors of the cavernous main hall, I was rapidly disabused of my anxiety.

Even then, a quarter of an hour before the event was due to start, the ushers were refusing entry to people.

All the places in the hall - which seats about 1 200 - were either reserved or had been taken, and there seemed to be at least another 300 people clamouring at the doors.

So scores of people did not get in - not until later, when they were allowed in through some side doors. If my partner and I had not bluffed our way in and then into the seats reserved for VIPs (heh, heh), we would have missed the introductory words of writer Elinor Sisulu, the evening's mistress of ceremonies.

Judge Albie Sachs of the constitutional court was seated to our left, and Frene Ginwala, the former speaker of the house of assembly and now commissioner of the inquiry into Vusi Pikoli, the suspended national director of public prosecutions, was to the right.

In short, the number and the calibre of people who came to the book launch of Gevisser's *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* made it one of the most remarkable this country has witnessed.

Who were the people who came in droves? And why did they?

It's difficult and foolish to generalise about a multitude. But I would hazard that about 50 percent of those present were Gauteng's intelligentsia.

In this group I include judges, politicians and VIPs such as Sachs, Ginwala and Blade Nzimande, the general secretary of the SA Communist Party, as well as the so-called chattering classes of Johannesburg's northern suburbs. They

are the kind of people who subscribe to *The Sunday Independent* (the really intelligent ones do this) and the *Mail & Guardian*.

Ten percent of those present seemed to be members of the media (those that actually do it and those who teach it), and of academia in general. And a hefty 40 percent of attendees appeared to be students.

The evening was organised and sponsored by Jonathan Ball, Gevisser's publishers, and also by the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) and the *Sunday Times* - and all had clearly marketed the event in earnest.

Gevisser is also known to be an indefatigable and clever networker. So it's hardly surprising that the hall was chock-a-block. But the real reasons that so many people came to the launch were, I think, these:

First, despite everything that has been written in other books and in newspapers, Mbeki remains something of an enigma - and people are dying to know what makes the president tick, especially as he has not been receiving wonderful press lately and has gone to war, for the moment anyway, with the *Sunday Times*.

Second, despite blithe ANC denials that such a struggle exists, most people seem to have noticed that there is a brutal succession battle for the ANC presidency taking place between Mbeki and Jacob Zuma.

Using a number of rare photographs, projected on to a screen, as the skeleton of his talk, Gevisser's presentation was brilliant. The audience was spellbound for close to an hour. No one could have gone home without a better understanding and feeling about Mbeki, his family and his major interests and passions.

But *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* is a biography and Gevisser is a biographer. He therefore did not draw any major or direct conclusions about today's realpolitik. It was presumably the job of the panel of five, seated on the stage, to winkle such things out by means of their questions.



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The agreement by the organisers was that each panelist could ask his or her question or questions for a maximum of seven minutes and that Gevisser would answer all the questions together afterwards.

I was told - by a very authoritative source, whose name I cannot reveal because he would be deeply embarrassed - that it had been decided not to open up the discussion to the audience lest a certain other, well-known Mbeki biographer took the opportunity to harangue the house.

Ferial Haffajee, the editor of the *Mail & Guardian*, was up first. She asked whether Mbeki was a "feminist".

This stopped being as silly a question as it initially sounded when it became clear that Haffajee was actually asking Gevisser how Mbeki related to women - given

that some of the biggest influences in his life had been women and given, too, that "the face of HIV/Aids" in South Africa "is clearly female".

Next was Bheki Khumalo, a group general manager at Sasol, but formerly Mbeki's usually straight-talking spokesman. Khumalo's main interest seemed to be in taking verbal potshots at Xolela Mangcu, the columnist and political analyst, who would come fourth.

But Khumalo did ask Gevisser to put on record that he had never been censored in any way. Gevisser later confirmed that he had been entirely free to write what he liked.

The third questioner was Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Cape Town and the author of *A Human Being Died That Night*, a book about erstwhile Vlakplaas commander Eugene de Kock.

Gobodo-Madikizela asked a long, rambling question about writing psycho-biography and various related matters, during the course of which the audience unfortunately lost her drift, so much so that some people suggested loudly that she get to the end of her question as quickly as possible.

Mangcu, with a surprising lack of quotations from long-dead American sociologists, essentially asked Gevisser what the point was of psycho-biography of a person and his family if it could not be related in some way to the "choices, the political choices" made by that person.

Mangcu was asking, in other words, why it had not been explained during Gevisser's presentation why Mbeki sometimes made some strange (in Mangcu's view anyway) decisions and claims.

But it was the last panelist,

Professor Deborah Posel, the director of WISER, and usually a wise person, who got the prize, from me at least, for the best question of all.

I know that "gender" is a major debating point in the academy, and I suspect that Posel was probably as taken aback as anyone by the hundreds of faces looking up at the stage from the hall, but she said to Gevisser that she wanted to know all about Mbeki's "masculinity".

What does she mean (I wondered fearfully)? Does she want to know about the size of Mbeki's equipment, or what? And would Gevisser tell us?

It grew even more fun when Gevisser, trying to answer both Posel and Gobodo-Madikizela, and also perhaps a little overexcited by them, explained that, as a biographer, it was his duty "to go as far as [my] subject will let me.

"If my subject invites me into his bed, then I will go into it," said Gevisser, who is an openly (and proudly) gay person.

I was watching Khumalo when Gevisser said this, and saw the mouth of the president's former spokesperson drop so far open that I feared he might never close it again.

For one moment, I think Khumalo believed that Gevisser might reveal to the Wits Great Hall and the world that he had had an affair with the president.

But Gevisser did not. Neither did he tell us anything about Mbeki's tackle.

Still, despite these shortcomings, I went away from the Wits Great Hall having learned a great deal about Mbeki, South Africa, the political passion of people in this country, and maybe even a little about feminism and masculinity.