

# Mbeki: The debate furthered

President's biographer draws crowds of ordinary South Africans, writes **Glenda Daniels**

THE Wits Great Hall was packed out half an hour before Mark Gevisser's public lecture was scheduled to start. The anticipation was palpable. And this on a Monday evening.

A former student chuckled that such excitement hadn't been witnessed at the university since the '80s when students packed the Great Hall before marching against the various states of emergency imposed then.

Was the interest in Gevisser's lecture — hosted by the Sunday Times, Jonathan Ball publishers, the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (Wiser) and Exclusive Books — about people wanting desperately to understand their president, or testimony to the writer's brilliance?

Gevisser has outdone even himself with *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream*

“While I support the Sunday Times, you've got it wrong, Mbeki is not an Aids denialist, he's an Aids dissident

*Deferred.* His study is deep and fascinating and he has sketched a human portrait of a man called variously an enigma, Machiavellian, an intellectual, a visionary and Stalinist.

As a public speaker, Gevisser was equally engaging and his content riveting.

But the phenomenal turnout — which meant people had to bring in plastic seats to line the aisles, sit on the floor or stand — was about more than Gevisser. People are turning to his Mbeki biography to peel away the layers of complexity to reveal the motivations and the politics of the man.

Gevisser explains that he sat at Mbeki's shoulder from 1999 to get a grip on his subject. And he certainly has a grip. In fact, it could be argued that the grip might be a tad too tight. Gevisser said an occupational hazard of being a journalist is not knowing boundaries, and he would jump into bed to get closer to a subject if need be.



TALKING POINT: Mark Gevisser's researched biography promises to bring perspicacity to the enigma that is Thabo Mbeki

Picture: ELLEN ELMENDORP

Of course Mbeki kept him at arm's length, and Gevisser said he wouldn't have been keen to get too close anyway. But while he was not allowed to get too close in an emotional or physical sense, Gevisser clearly lived with Mbeki in his head for years.

There is a tangible closeness to Mbeki in the book and he renders a compassionate account of the man many do not want as president any longer.

You begin to wonder: Does Gevisser like Mbeki?

When he defends him by saying,

“while I'm a proud supporter of the Sunday Times, you've got it wrong, Mbeki is not an Aids denialist, he is an Aids dissident”, you think, “Aha! He does like Mbeki!”

Bring on more public debate so that we can argue this one out, I say. The debate on Mbeki has only just begun.

Let's take the questions posed to Gevisser by a panel after the lecture on Monday. Ferial Haffajee, editor of the Mail & Guardian, kept it short and sweet when she asked about Mbeki's “feminism”, Professor Deborah Posel, director of

Wiser, also focused on gender, and while Professor Phumla Gobodo-Madikizela made an interesting point about psychoanalysis, she was so long-winded that her question was lost.

Former Mbeki spokesman Bheki Khumalo proudly announced that Gevisser was not censored by the Presidency, and this was confirmed by the writer.

Politically, the best point was made by political analyst Xolela Mangcu, who pointed out that Mbeki is not unique in coming from an emotionally traumatised and dis-

connected background, a central thesis of the book. So then why do we, as a nation, have to suffer and be victim to or be victims of the political blunders of Mbeki, he asked.

I loved Mangcu's point. It ensures my grudging sympathy and empathy for Mbeki do not go as far as Gevisser's.

Having said that, though, long may debate flourish, and kudos to Gevisser for reinjecting this culture back into South Africa in what might otherwise seem the gloomiest of times for our democracy.

## ONLINE VIEWS

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ON [www.thetimes.co.za](http://www.thetimes.co.za)

### On the article, 'Tutu calls for global death penalty ban':

DESMOND Tutu might have a point. Think about South Africa for instance; if we had the death penalty I am sure no single white person would be executed.

The reality is that we do have whites who commit serious crimes but they get away with nothing more than a slap on the wrist. Think Piet Odendaal, Mark Scott-Crossley, Wouter Basson, the Waterkloof Boys and many more. Where are they? Enjoying freedom.

Although crime in South Africa deserves more punishment than is currently applied, the death penalty would unfortunately be applied to one section of the population and because of that I feel it shouldn't be allowed. — Wonder

### On The Times Live Events blog, 'The end of the road for Bjorn':

THE show is over for me now. It won't be the same without him! — Fan

### On The Times Blogumists blog, 'Wanted: one young impressionable mind':

DUDE, I have two of them! They are yours for the day. Hell, take them for a week. Just be warned, they swear like sailors. — Tertia

### On Ray Hartley's blog, 'Big business smackdown. What a show':

“THE winner is the consumer” in theory. The fines become a deterrent to further collusion. But what about now? What about the collusion that's been happening for the past 12 years? Are we, the consumers, actually ever going to see and feel the effects of this fine on our everyday lives? Unlikely.

It would have been better to say to these guys, “What is your price over the next year?” and then take that price and physically reduce it by R1 and then monitor it. Now that would have been a remedy that we, the consumers, would have enjoyed and benefited from.

Do you remember some months back that

Toyota paid a fine to the Commission because of price fixing? Any appreciable decrease in the price of a Toyota lately? I didn't think so. — Bonginkosi

### On Fred Khumalo's blog, 'Tokyo gives Winnie Mandela a swanky ride':

YOU vote for a particular party because it has guaranteed you your privileges and favourable economic policies and incentives and concessions.

You are favouring Trevor Manuel above all the other ANC politicians because his exchange controls, donations, charity and corporate taxes are to your advantage, whereas I chose a party on the grounds that it will be strong on national security, local security and will enhance economic growth.

I'm not engaging with you on who the best candidate for the presidency is since you are doing so on semantic grounds, not on patriotism.

Either you respond to me or you don't — its immaterial, since I'm filling your ears.

Your silence will not deter me but fuel me, so it's up to you. — Tim Singiswa

### On the article, 'Cause of Delmas diarrhoea unknown':

HOW is it possible not to find the cause of this fiasco when the television shows the raw sewage floating in the drinking water? Are these fools brain dead or is it a stalling tactic to try and recover the stolen rates and taxes money to do something about the problem? What a lot of idiots. — Morecats

### On the article, 'Aids battle requires moral resolve':

AS SOUTH Africans, we fought against a lot of things irrespective of the colour of our skins. So I applaud our deputy president.

As Africans (black, coloured, Indian and white) we need to stand together on this as we have on many other occasions and fight this battle. You go girl, this is girl power, not a case of boys making war! — Diane