

# Filling the aisles to debate Mbeki

**W**OULD President Thabo Mbeki be flattered or flustered by the fact that more than 1 000 people packed the University of the Witwatersrand's great hall on Monday for the launch of Mark Gevisser's biography of him, *A Dream Deferred*?

I couldn't begin to hazard an answer to this question as the president is a bit of an enigma — which is probably why so many people flocked to hear a lecture and a debate on Mbeki.

Their interest is not unprecedented — Nelson Mandela's Long Walk to Freedom is one of the best-selling books in SA.

At the launch every seat in the hall was filled, people stood all along its perimeter, sat in its aisles and the overflow watched the events on big screens outside.

Mbeki, the aloof intellectual, may have been a bit disconcerted by the "ag moeder" sigh that



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passed through the audience when the only surviving photograph of his childhood was flashed on to the stage — of a six-month-old baby Thabo on his mother's lap. He may have appreciated the audience's delight at seeing a photograph of his great-great-grandfather who looks just like him — same eyes, same lips, same ears. Who knows what he would make of an audience agog at seeing photos of him with his beautiful white girlfriend in the 1960s?

What was most entertaining was the panel discussion that followed Gevisser's lecture. The audience, easily rivalling the numbers of people who attend first division soccer matches, clearly appreciated the sparring.

Mail & Guardian editor Ferial Haffajee, former presidential spokesman Bheki Khumalo, former Truth and Reconciliation Commission commissioner Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, The Week-

ender columnist Xolela Mangcu and Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research director Deborah Posel sparred with each other and Gevisser.

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Mbeki often adopts an irritated tone in his weekly column as he lectures us on issues he believes we misunderstand. He often misinterprets questioning as criticism and attack. He should have been at the launch, he would have learned a bit more about the country he finds so strange, especially about how we love a good debate.

Gevisser summed it up beautifully: "As I look around this hall tonight I find myself immensely proud to be a Johannesburger. We are a city that loves ideas, that loves debate. Tonight is a celebration of that, and it's great!"