

“WHY IS THABO MBEKI A ‘NITEMARE’?”

Mark Gevisser

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Inspired by a satirical play by Tsepo wa Mamatu, Mark Gevisser wonders whether blaming Thabo Mbeki for all that is wrong in South Africa isn't a politically expedient strategy to evade what should be acknowledged as a far broader communal culpability. The players, on and off the stage, suggest that Mbeki's legacy may be more complex and more important than much contemporary public discussion suggests.

In October 2009, I was invited attend a performance of *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*, a play written and directed by Tsepo wa Mamatu, and performed by his students at the Wits University Theatre. The play was an unsettling mix of two genres: in part a biographical narrative of Thabo Mbeki's life, in part an acute satire of contemporary South African politics. On the one hand there was almost-sentimental nostalgia for Mbeki's biography; on the other a hard-edged (and often very funny) fury – not just at Mbeki himself, but at the politics unleashed by his downfall. The play expands the few days it took Mbeki to resign after he was “recalled” into a Lear-like eternity, wherein Mbeki is faced with the consequences of his actions and his audience is to confront its collu-

sion with the politics of power as represented by the current-day ANC. At its climax, the play's auteur-figure, a middle-class youth leader, confronts the audience from within a literal cage. His words carry the ambivalence of the iconic freedom song *Senzeni Na?*: “What have we done to deserve this?” but also “What have we done?”

The play itself becomes the escape-vehicle with which the writer and his cast free themselves from the constraints of their own political heritage, by articulating an agency and identity beyond allegiance to the ANC. And in so doing, they force their audience to confront – as Mbeki's downfall has – the reality that we are ruled not by saints, but by flawed men who are subjective beings rather than noble avatars of struggle, and who act in their own interests rather than, necessarily, those of their people. Such consciousness appears to be Mbeki's greatest – unwilling – legacy to South Africa: he seems to have ushered us into a very necessary coming of age; an era of *realpolitik* where we find ourselves unshackled, at last, from the redemptive fantasies of the liberation era.

And yet, when chatting with the cast for a couple of hours afterwards, over drinks in the Wits Theatre bar, I came to understand more deeply another element of Mbeki's legacy; one which suggests a continuation of the redemptive impulse in South African politics. I was sitting in a circle with the best black students that one of South Africa's best universities has to offer – all of them manifestly critical thinkers with a deep social conscience – and I was struck by the passion that the subject of my biography aroused in them. Mbeki had recently come to speak at Wits – his first major public address since his downfall – and they had, of course, gone to hear him. Their



Scene from *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*
by Tsepo wa Mamatu
Photo: Courtesy Sally Gaule ©

account of the experience was a brush with greatness, and they all articulated a deep distress at what had befallen him, even as they understood it to be a consequence of his own actions.

One of them spoke about how Jacob Zuma had “lowered the bar” set by Mbeki, and all saw Zuma's victory as a consequence of the law of diminishing returns: South African political leadership on a downhill slope. They were by no means supporters of the new opposition Congress of the People (COPE), and many of them had voted for the ANC. But they were all – as defined by their current circumstances, if not by their provenance – indisputably members of a black elite. And as I sat with them, I felt that I was touching something profound: how important Mbeki has been to the formation of this class in South Africa, with his emphasis on self-reliance and excellence; with his deep commitment to the notion that South Africans, and particularly black South Africans, had to be “world class”.

Too often Mbeki's critics forget, when decrying the way Black Economic Empowerment created a few black millionaires but left everyone else in the dirt, about the tens of thousands of black people who entered the middle class as a consequence of his policies: not Ramaphosas or Sexwales, but bank clerks and copywriters, medics and accountants. Certainly, these include a fair number of unqualified civil servants who grow fat on corrupted tenders and teachers who care more about their salaries than the social good, but they also encompass an entire generation of people represented by the cast of *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*: young, educated South Africans who strive towards an excellence and a critical independence that is the very safeguard of any democracy. Even if forced to abandon formal politics by the likes of Julius Malema and the lack of a viable alternative, the young men and women sitting round the table with me will run South Africa in the future: its banks, its media, its mines, its parastatal utilities, its universities, even its trade unions.

[young, educated South Africans who strive towards an excellence and a critical independence that is the very safeguard of any democracy](#)

Like Lear's daughters, they may grieve or rage against or even plot against their capricious father, but they are nonetheless Mbeki's Children. We should thank him for them – even if, at the same time, we castigate him and his government for having paid too little attention to a new Lost Generation that came of age, unemployed and uneducated, alongside them.

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Scene from *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*

by Tsepo wa Mamatu

Photo: Courtesy Sally Gaule ©

“It was clear that if South Africa's fragile new democracy was to be saved, Mbeki had to go.” Thus writes the author RW Johnson in his book *South Africa's Brave New World*, claiming that there was unusual consensus on this matter in 2008, from Tony Leon on the right to Jeremy Cronin on the left. Xolela Mangcu reflected a conventional wisdom, then – certainly among intellectuals and professionals – when he wrote in his book, *The Democratic Moment*, that “this country is in the muck it is in because of Mbeki's actions.”

Was Mbeki really such a threat to South African democracy that he had to be removed from office – through the wielding of one-party-state power – six months before the end of his term? And even if the instances Mangcu cites are indeed worthy of censure and even legal action was South Africa really “in the muck”?

Certainly, Mbeki failed, many times – not least in his inability to reflect upon himself and his actions publicly and critically; a shortcoming of intellect as

much as of statesmanship. He followed a devastatingly misguided approach to AIDS. He was unable to square African foreign policy (particularly in the case of Zimbabwe) to his high ideals of an African Renaissance. He was unable to staunch corruption and patronage (particularly at local level) despite much high minded talk on the subject. He was insouciant about the criminal justice system except when it concerned his allies and opponents within the ANC. He tended towards grandiose policies that were often unrealistic. He re-racialised the South African political discourse and accused those who disagreed with him of racism if they were white, or of Uncle-Tommery if they were black. He confused elite capital accumulation (“BEE”) with social transformation. He subverted democratic process to prosecute his own intra-party political battles, and to defend an indefensible arms deal that became the poisoned well of South African politics. He was unable (or unwilling) to present himself and thus his government as approachable and responsive. This led to a high-handedness that submerged the democratic moment into the very worst of the ANC's hierarchical (some might say “Stalinist”) political traditions, and brought upon South Africa the reactive populism of the Jacob Zuma era.

At the root of much of Mbeki's political personality was a disconnect; a prickly and defensive mien that prevented him from listening to reason if it meant changing his mind; that contracted rather than expanded our national sense of possibility and thus provoked anxiety rather than encouraged hope. Mbeki's leadership style fused Leninist vanguardism and nationalist defensiveness: “I know what's best for my people, so please do not question me.” Both strands to this political identity have their



Scene from *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*
by Tsepo wa Mamatu
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roots in his psychological and ideological history, but they are not his entire political being. He was both “Sussex Man” and “Moscow Man”, and his commitment to the values of liberal humanist democracy were perpetually jockeying for prominence with his redemptive Africanism and his vanguardist instrumentalism. The interplay of these three ideologies wrought much damage, but much creativity too. At their worst, they enabled Mbeki to think that he could challenge the might of the pharmaceutical industry and scientific orthodoxy by making his own way through the evidence; at their best, they enabled him to imagine the post-apartheid state that made the space for Tsepo wa Mamatu and his extraordinary students at the Wits School of Arts.

The truth is that Thabo Mbeki designed much of the negotiated settlement that spared South Africa a descent into bloody civil war. He presided over a period of unprecedented growth and totally unexpected stability by steering both a new government and a highly vulnerable economy smoothly through the

turbulent waters of a political transition and a global economic crisis – even if he failed dismally to bring many of his comrades along with him. He forged a liberal democratic state founded on the principles of an open society – even if his own practise sometimes contradicted these. He mastered the details of government when almost everyone else was either star struck by the “Madiba magic” era or stunned by the magnitude of the task ahead. His government did not just hold things down: it significantly improved the South African infrastructure and its tax base, and in so doing reduced poverty through social grants and service provision even if it could not stimulate the economy in such a way as to combat unemployment.

[He forged a liberal democratic state founded on the principles of an open society](#)

Ultimately, Mbeki changed the face of South Africa in several significant and indisputable ways, even if the effects of these changes are open to debate. His twin policies of aggressive affirmative action and black economic empowerment, implemented during a period of economic growth, created a vibrant new black middle class – numbering a fraction of a percentile when the ANC came to power in 1994 and estimated by 2008 to be anywhere between 300 000 and 2 million people, out of a total population of 50 million. Some analysts blame the Mbeki government for encouraging – as Brian Pottinger puts it in his book *The Mbeki Legacy* – “the growth of the dependency society”: Pottinger sees the “baleful” effect of this not only among welfare recipients but also among middle-class blacks, many of whom are recipients of state largesse due to affirmative action.

But even if the growth of this class did not have the “trickle down” effect into black society imagined by Mbeki and his financial managers in the mid-1990s, *Mbeki and Other Nitemares* alone is evidence that this growing class – with its premium on excellence and independence – is one of the best possible insurances South Africa has in the defense of its democracy.

The area around which there is most contention, when it comes to Mbeki’s legacy, is that of economic policy. He and his financial managers insist that they stabilized the economy in 1996 with their Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, staving off a crash that would have forced the country to take out the begging bowl before the International Monetary Fund. They cite, as evidence, the unprecedented era of economic growth over which Mbeki presided, the dramatic increase in the efficiency of tax collection, and the fact that by 2004 South Africa was able to spend more per capita on social services than any other developing country. But despite the fact that there was a steady decline in unemployment from 1999 until the recession of 2009, it remains unacceptably high, and this was one of the strongest contributing factors to the crime rate, against which the state has been largely ineffective: South Africa remains one of the most violent countries in the world. And despite the fact that, as the office of the Presidency’s website shows, almost all key indicators show the country to be better off at the time Mbeki left office than it was when he arrived, South Africa has slipped on many credible international scales, including the UN’s Human Development index. Reasons proffered for this slippage include the dramatic decline of the manufacturing sector, ineffective regulation, inef-

ficient health and education services despite massive expenditure, the increasing skills shortage, the collapse of local government (particularly in small towns), and the collapse of the criminal justice system. These are massive deficits, not small bumps in a road, and they provide a dark negative image to the prosperity and promise reflected in the promotion of the country during the 2010 World Cup. The fact that these two images coexist side by side is evidence that the Mbeki government left South Africa a more unequal place than it found it, even if it is not as poor as it was.

Could any government have done better, in South Africa, in the years following 1994, given the job, given the circumstances? Who knows what a Hani presidency or a Ramaphosa presidency would have looked like, and how they would have dealt with the difficult situations that often brought out the worst in Mbeki? Writing just over a year after Mbeki left office, it still seems premature, to me, to pronounce definitively on his legacy. All we can do is begin to set up a table of deficits and benefits as I have done above – and as I have done, in more detail, in the epilogue to the second edition of *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*. But it does seem apt – even urgent – to consider the question of why the former South African president has been so consistently vilified, as if he has come to carry all the sins and shortcomings of the generation charged with shepherding South Africa into liberation.

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Thabo Mbeki promised a certain kind of African leadership and failed to deliver it. So much of the anger against him has been at a man who seemed

unable to live up to his own exacting standards of democratic practise; standards he codified and spent millions of South African tax money peddling to the rest of the continent as the African Peer Review Mechanism. I have lost count at the number of South Africans who have said to me: “Whatever else I thought of Thabo Mbeki, I at least thought he was clean. I was wrong.” Or: “Whatever else I thought of Thabo Mbeki, I at least thought he was a democrat. Now I don’t believe that either too.” Nothing – not even his AIDS policies (which at least were well-intentioned) – did more damage to Mbeki’s reputation than the evidence of his willingness to corrupt the organs of state, and his determination to hold onto power, in 2007.

His government’s meddling in the case against former the police chief Jackie Selebi is even more damnable than its meddling in the case against Jacob Zuma: first, because the evidence was stronger, and second, because in the case of Selebi, Mbeki’s conduct amounted to protecting an allegedly corrupt police chief in bed with criminals against a demonstrably clean chief prosecutor. In the firing of Zuma, as in his AIDS policy, the argument could have been made at least that he was acting in what he believed to be the public interest. But with his government’s victimisation of Vusi Pikoli, the National Director of Public Prosecutions who decided to charge Selebi, there could be nothing more at stake than the protection of a crony, at a time when Selebi’s political support was important to Mbeki. Then, with his quest for a third term as president of the ANC, Mbeki revealed to the nation his personal hunger for power; this might have been more acceptable if it had not, for so long, been so vigorously denied. In comparison, Zuma’s own bodily appetites



Scene from *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*
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seemed small beer.

Mbeki was meant to have been the supreme rationalist; the technocrat who could save South Africa. And if he was not always transparent or pleasant, some comfort could be taken, at least, in the belief that he was a master strategist who knew how to wield power effectively. If his response to the AIDS crisis compromised that notion by revealing him as someone who saw himself more as a prophet-in-the-wilderness than a pragmatist (it took him five years to accept that his position was doing irreparable damage) then his ham-handedness around the charges against Jacob Zuma put paid to it entirely. If his intention was to dispatch with Zuma, it had the opposite effect: it made him Zuma a victim, a martyr, and it gave him a cause. If Mbeki was such a skilled operator, how could he not have seen that the decision to announce publicly that there was prima facie evidence against Jacob Zuma without charging him would backfire? The answer, as in so many other of his political missteps – such as the coup plot

allegations against Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale and Matthews Phosa – must be found somewhere else: in his personal anxieties about power, so at odds with the public persona, built over decades of being the ANC's suave propagandist, of being a man at ease in the world.

The brilliance of his opponents was to identify – and to exploit – these weaknesses. Using the same vanguardist mode in which Mbeki was schooled but deploying it more effectively, Zuma's supporters identified a latent dissatisfaction within the ANC, and sparked an anti-establishment rebellion out of it. Mbeki's victimisation of Zuma, allegedly because he was both ambitious and uneducated – “not presidential material” – became symbolic of the way so many people felt left out, or left behind; denied a seat at the banquet of victory.

For many reasons, not least the country's early industrialisation and thus its proletarian history, South Africa's politics are driven by a particularly acute sense of aspiration; a sense that people can alter a prescribed destiny. While this energy gave South Africans the perseverance to struggle for decades against apartheid and the imagination to forge a new democratic society, it also generates the by-product of perpetual grievance. This is the labour movement's great gift to the South African democracy, for it counterbalances the feudal fatalism of tribalism, and ensures that the ANC does not install a Mugabe, a Moi, an Mbeki-for-life, a Zuma-for-life. But it also ensures chronic dissatisfaction with those who have more than you do: the rich, the powerful. Within the post-liberation ANC, such discontent was (perhaps necessarily) repressed by the first generation of leadership; by Mandela, by Mbeki, *and* by Zuma. Once the pantheon splintered and the

leadership itself started fighting with one another, permission was implicitly granted to complain; to campaign, again.

[permission was implicitly granted to complain; to campaign, again](#)

Central to the campaign to oust Mbeki, then, was a pivotal notion in post-liberation politics: that the leader must represent the oppressed against the oppressor; that he is their candidate against “The Man”, even if he is, simultaneously, “The Man” himself. This requires an almost impossible double-act: even as you need to prove to voters that you can dispense largesse and offer access to power, you have to convince them too that you are in fact being elected to challenge this power on behalf of the ordinary, the down-trodden, the left-behind. Mbeki's nativist politics were, in part, an attempt to play this double-act, and the sharpest evidence of his failure at this role was his descent into AIDS-dissidence through his fight against Big Pharma: his misguided protection of Africans against the profiteering multinationals dumping their toxic medication on them was, in no small part, a defence against the accusation that he was a neo-liberal who had “rolled over” for big business and international capital.

Jacob Zuma's ticket to power – and thus out of jail – was, of course, that Thabo Mbeki was “The Man” and that the rest of us (like Zuma himself) were the victims. As is now common cause, Zuma's campaign drew together a coalition of the “walking wounded”; comrades who had in one way or another been alienated or sidelined by Mbeki. The perceived injury to Jacob Zuma became a symbol of the injury to them all, and was the vehicle for their suc-

cessful coalition: all they had in common (beyond a membership of the ANC) was a shared loathing for Mbeki. Their only glue was that they were all set against “The Man”; if Mbeki ceased being the villain, they risked disintegration. There was thus valuable political capital in assigning the mistakes and the excesses of the first fifteen years of ANC government primarily to Thabo Mbeki.

Certainly, the Zuma administration has been admirably candid in acknowledging problems Mbeki had for so long underplayed or denied – from a disastrous new education curriculum, to the crime rate, to the AIDS epidemic. But with a couple of notable exceptions, Zuma and his executive have refrained from expressing any kind of regret, or culpability, for the failed policies they are endeavoring to replace. This is a consequence of the difficult situation in which they find themselves: most of them were, after all, leaders of both the Mbeki-led ANC and the Mbeki-led government. And so, while the basic education minister Angie Motshekga was appropriately lauded for her courage in signing the “death certificate” of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in November 2009, she was amnesiac about the role that her party and she in particular – as a provincial minister for education – had played in promoting this, perhaps one of the signal failures, of the Mbeki era. And while Jacob Zuma has entirely rehabilitated the government AIDS programme by providing the political leadership so sorely lacking under Mbeki, he has failed to account for his complicity in the Mbeki AIDS fiasco, when he was in fact the member of government responsible for AIDS policy and perfectly placed to counter Mbeki's own obduracy during his deputy-presidency should he have so chosen.



Scene from *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*
by Tsepo wa Mamatu
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In both of the above cases, one could counter that the implementation of substantive change is far more meaningful than a chest-beating ‘mea culpa’, particularly when the latter might result in destructive blame-throwing. But taking responsibility is an essential part of democratic governance: not only does it give the electorate its due respect (it is one of the practises that transforms subjects into citizens) but it also enables policy-makers to look cool-headedly at why a situation developed in the first place. An “AIDS Truth Commission” – real or symbolic – might reveal, for instance, the extent to which Mbeki’s anti-medical nativism spoke to, and out of, the broader denialism in South African society. To acknowledge this is not to exonerate him from culpability, but to understand his own denialism in context, and thus to be able to develop policy to counter it.

In November 2009, as I was drafting this essay, the Young Communist League of South Africa – a vibrant component of the ruling ANC alliance – sug-

gested that a judicial commission of inquiry with prosecutorial powers be appointed to determine whether Mbeki was “guilty of mass killing” due to his AIDS policies. The YCL was responding to an extraordinary admission by the health minister, Aaron Motsoaledi, that Mbeki’s AIDS policies were directly the cause for the doubling of AIDS death figures from 1997 to 2008. Citing the Western Cape, where anti-retroviral medication was made available during this period and the trend was reversed, the minister said bluntly that an “abdication of the fight against AIDS” had led directly to the death rate: “Our attitude toward HIV/AIDS put us where we are.”

taking responsibility is an essential part of democratic governance

A fascinating public debate ensued. While the ANC distanced itself from the YCL call and most commentators wrote that prosecuting Mbeki would be neither viable nor helpful, many concurred that Mbeki was morally – even if not criminally – liable for the AIDS deaths. This position was put most cogently by Frans Cronje of the South African Institute of Race Relations in the November 2009 issue of *SAIRR Today*. He made a critical point: given that neither the ANC nor parliament ever censured Mbeki, “what is often described as Thabo Mbeki’s AIDS policy would in fact be better described as the ANC’s AIDS policy. When the ANC did remove him from office it was over a simple power play in the ruling alliance suggesting that the party saw an internal power squabble as more serious than the deaths of so many of its supporters.”

The *Business Day* columnist Jacob Dlamini put it stronger on 3 December, 2009: it was “fraudulent

and downright inaccurate to personalize SA’s government failing on the AIDS front and pretend it was all the work of one man”. Dlamini urged against blaming Mbeki “for everything that has gone wrong in this country”, reminding readers that Zuma had been entirely complicit not only in Mbeki’s AIDS policy, but in South Africa’s economic policy, in the deployment of incompetent officials, and much else besides.

The following week, Jonny Steinberg took the argument further in *Business Day*: the demonization of Mbeki into a “national ogre”, he wrote, ignored the context in which made his decisions. Steinberg highlighted the dystopia that the ANC inherited, and how deeply the new rulers were affected by the fact that they did not have the power to effect change according to the blueprints they had been designing for decades; that, instead, they found themselves governing a country characterized by joblessness, crime and illness about which they could do little. Mbeki voiced this despair and anguish; following his fall, Steinberg suggested, the anger at Mbeki was a national expunging of the former president’s “visible disenchantment, his dark brooding, his sense that things were out of joint”: “We have made him an ogre, I think, because we wish that what has departed with him is a country ill at ease with itself. It is wishful thinking indeed.”

Steinberg’s piece drew a sharp response on 11 December from another *Business Day* columnist, Eusebius McKaiser, who accused both Steinberg – and me, as Mbeki’s biographer – of committing a profound moral “mistake”: “excessive contextualizing can lead to this kind of unintended exoneration of political and moral wrongdoing.” While work such as my own might help us to understand Mbeki,

McKaiser continues, “understanding does not displace blame. Too many people died because of his needless self-indulgence, absent father or not. Mbeki earned the ogre tag. It certainly was not thrust upon him.”

Steinberg’s article was characteristically critical about Mbeki, with sharp judgments on how the former president abused his powers of office, mismanaged the government, was blinded to an epidemic, and projected his own dislike of his people onto the West. The very fact that McKaiser reads the article as an exoneration proves Steinberg’s point: that the demonization of Mbeki, in the period following his downfall, was driven by emotional considerations rather than an empirical assessment of Mbeki’s legacy.

[It was as if ... South Africans had charged him with nothing less than the custody of their dreams](#)

In the *Sunday Independent*, on 21 September 2008, I wrote that if Thabo Mbeki’s removal from power in 2007-8 was something of a regicide, this was because the ruling African National Congress ceded so much power to him that the only way to claim it back was to decapitate him – metaphorically, of course. Certainly, Mbeki might have earned this fate because of his own regal behaviour. But what is remarkable about so much commentary on Mbeki after his fall is the extent to which it cedes to him, precisely, the power for which it purports to critique him: it creates of him a demonic fetish for all that was poisonous, or ineffective, or mendacious, in South African public life.

In the run-up to Polokwane, in late 2007, I wrote in the introduction to my biography that while

many of the criticisms of Mbeki were legitimate and healthy, “the pitch of the discourse often seemed fueled by a sense of anger and betrayal leveled at someone who had been vested with a responsibility far greater than mere executive office. Suddenly, Mbeki became a lightning rod for so many frustrations. It was as if, by voting him into office, South Africans had charged him with nothing less than the custody of their dreams – and with every violent crime, with every unemployed high school graduate, with every AIDS death, he stood accused of shattering them.” At the time of writing this essay, two years later – and over a year after his dismissal – this seems truer than ever.

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Since my biography was published, the vast majority of emails I have received have come from one particular demographic group: black students and young professionals. Here is a fairly representative example: “Thank you for your book. I feel I have learned so much about the Great Man. He remains my inspiration. I am what I am because of him.” Or another: “The man is incredible, and his mind a monument of force, without parallel within the current leadership. It is so easy to be charmed by his sober, thoughtful persona, and perhaps as an artist there is nothing wrong in finding yourself at loss for words, yearning and wishing to describe a feeling that words will die for.”

If so many public voices in South Africa seemed to have a vested interest in keeping Thabo Mbeki bad, then many of my correspondents seemed to have a vested interest in keeping him *good*. Or, in some cases, in longing for the good that was there

until it went bad: “I still don’t understand [what happened to Mbeki]. It seems to me like he was corrupted by absolute power. Terrible. I had prayed and hoped that we would be different, but I guess look at Mugabe.”

What sadness there is in that “we”, for it is an acknowledgement of the end of South African exceptionalism; a coming to terms with the fact that “we” are just like everyone else: we produce our Mandelas, we produce our Malemas. We are no longer ‘the world’s greatest fairytale’, but rather a messy and unpredictable democracy with a deep history of conflict and history to overcome, run by flawed and self-interested men rather than saints and heroes.

Thabo Mbeki carries the aspirations of a generation – Mbeki’s Children – on his shoulders. As one of my correspondents put it about his own work: “One of my pet projects is this question of blackness and capacity. I guess what I am saying is, I dare not fail.” “Blackness and capacity” was, more than anything, Mbeki’s own ‘pet project’. “I dare not fail” was his credo: it drove him and it warped him. He transferred this quest for achievement and excellence – perhaps it is accurate to call it a neurosis – to a generation of young people, and it has defined many of them. And yet Mbeki *himself* failed: according to Jacob Zuma and his comrades, according to Xolela Mangcu, according to RW Johnson and Eusebius McKaiser and so many others.

The crisis generated by this allegation is significant. For some, his assassins are Judases and he must remain good: many of these young men and women formed the urban backbone of the COPE groundswell, and although their numbers were smaller, their fervent support for Mbeki matched that for Zuma by his supporters. Mbeki, like Zuma,



The cast of *Mbeki and Other Nitemares*
Photo: Courtesy Sally Gaule ©

was constructed as a class warrior, but it would be a caricature of his supporters to describe them solely as being interested in protecting the privilege of their class; in holding the barbarians at the gate. Rather, particularly in the light of a Zuma portrayed as a traditionalist and misogynist, Mbeki spoke to their quest for excellence and achievement; their creativity; their cosmopolitan aspirations. For others (including, by their own acknowledgement, many of his harshest critics in the media) he is bad precisely because he has let the team down: a profound sense of betrayal drives their anger. And for others still – such as Tsepo wa Mamatu and his cast – his downfall has prompted an identity crisis, and begun the process of cleaving them from the mother-movement; a process that cannot but eventually reshape South African politics, even if COPE is a washout.

I have been struck, after the publication of my book, how the expression “a dream deferred” has entered the South African political vernacular; it ran through *Mbeki and Other Nitemares* like a leitmo-

tif, capturing in its rhythms (Langston Hughes’ brilliance, not my own) all the nostalgia and all the anguish of the play and its performers. “Perhaps this, then, is why Mbeki has become such a “Nitemare”, even for those, like Tsepo wa Mamatu and his players, who readily admit his greatness. He urged the first generation of post-apartheid black professionals and intellectuals to define *themselves*, to follow their dreams rather than the destinies laid out for them by three centuries of oppression. And yet his story forces them – forces us all – to come to terms with a paradox about freedom: even if democracy requires us to act, there will always be limits to our agency.

[A version of this article is forthcoming in the book *Mbeki and After*, edited by Daryl Glaser, published by Wits University Press.](#)