



Vincent Bashford Liversage (Mothusi Magano) and Prudence Ngobese (Fortunate Dhlomo) in Neil Coppen's *Abnormal Loads*.

PHOTO: VAL ADAMSON

## Profound, complex drama about contested past

### THEATRE: ABNORMAL LOADS

DURBAN'S Neil Coppen is this year's Standard Bank Young Artist Award winner, and *Abnormal Loads*, the play he presented at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown as part of that award, is abundant proof that it was well deserved.

*Abnormal Loads* is a profound, complex piece of theatre that tells its story with humour and tenderness. It also tackles head on the issue of how contested history is in South Africa.

An event has happened deep in the past, but there can be no one truth about what took place: what you believe depends on where you stand and to what your prejudices or fears blind you.

The plot concerns a family in northern KwaZulu-Natal. The town of Bashford where they live in bears their name, and they have been proud of their heritage. They are now reduced to an ageing matriarch and her coloured grandson, Vincent, (brought to excellent life by Allison Cassels and Mothusi Maga-

no), but skeletons rattle in their cupboards and ghosts trouble their dreams, particularly Vincent's as he wrestles with his own complex past. History divides the Bashford descendants from the Joubert family on the other side of the river — their divergent views are a microcosm of South African history. And in the present a new love story unfolds between Vincent and Katrien Joubert, reopening old wounds and causing new problems.

As he has done in the past with work like *Tin Bucket Drum* and

*Tree Boy*, Coppen uses a lot of theatre business — unusual props and frequent scene changes — in telling his story, but here they are slicker and much less intrusive than I have found them in the past, playing their part in making a profound and moving theatrical experience.

Margaret von Klemperer

• *Abnormal Loads* will be staged at the Playhouse in Durban and the Market Theatre in Johannesburg next year.

## Taking the mickey out of the medium

### THEATRE: SLAP KOEJAWEL AND OTHER TIT BITS

FOR those who, like me, didn't know what the Slap Koejawel is, it's a dance where one slaps one's thighs together to make a clapping sound.

In this hilarious piece it also

refers to the two old ladies played by two actresses preparing to go on stage in a new South African play.

Annelisa Weiland and Vanessa Cooke, two of South Africa's most respected television and stage actresses, take the mickey out of the industry, modern society and themselves, as they go

through the motions of rehearsing, dressing and putting on makeup before the opening night.

Their comic timing is superb, and the swift changes from reality to acting make for a roller-coaster ride that is fresh and, at times, quite moving.

The play is directed by Robert

Whitehead, and these two seasoned performers are so comfortable on stage and with each other that the audience begins to feel that they are voyeurs peeping in on the dressing room. The characters are wacky, the dialogue hilarious, and Weiland can do a mean Slap Koejawel!

Peter Mitchell