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The Archbishop and the Antichrist

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by: [Naima Khan](#)

Naima Khan reviews hard-hitting new play *The Archbishop and the Antichrist* by Michael Ashton, now playing at the Soho Theatre.

News of proposed reduced sentences for rapists who confess their crime makes some of the sub-themes in [The Archbishop and The Antichrist](#) suddenly very relevant to the UK. The play looks at fictionalised meetings between Desmond Tutu and the people in his personal and political affairs while he works on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Writer, ex-prisoner and former barrister Michael Ashton provokes some interesting thoughts on the relationship between truth and justice and whether the former necessarily results in the latter. Does confession really result in an easier healing process and, for South Africa in particular, how can a nation begin to come to terms with the crimes committed in its name? Equally impressive is his ability to boil the issues down and present them in one man's struggle to come to terms with his actions during apartheid.

The Archbishop and The Antichrist is multilayered and incredibly rich. If you approach it already familiar with the events, there's an enormous amount of historical and political questioning to feast on. And without such familiarity, there are the confused and absorbing thoughts of one death-row prisoner, Piet Blomfield, as he wrestles with redemption.

Blomfield, the self-titled 'antichrist' manages to get the archbishop to visit him in prison where he questions the purpose and effectiveness of the TRC. His cynicism and his confused regard for religion is embodied fantastically by Oscar Pearce. Pearce's constant foot-tapping and chain-jangling draw the audience into his world and the whirl of thoughts in his head. With Blomfield, the archbishop faces direct questions that require direct answers. There's no beating about the bush with Blomfield, who does his best to swerve the grey areas. It's a striking contrast to Tutu's meetings with FW de Klerk and the TRC who endlessly talk in circles, unable to get to concrete conclusions.

de Klerk is played by the brilliant Peter Cartwright, one member of a flawless cast including Jeffrey Kisson as Desmond Tutu, Pamela Nomvete as his wife and Dona Croll as his secretary. The only criticism I have of the play is a minor staging issue. At times the physical distance between de Klerk and the archbishop make it difficult to focus. Their tennis match of words doesn't need to be highlighted any further by making them sit so far apart as they deliver their lines. Especially as there is such a great space in the centre thanks to the effective in-the-round seating. There are rarely more than two characters on stage at a time and the clever lighting makes each scene

feel like a confrontation in a restrained boxing ring. The characters can seem intensely close, like Desmond and his wife, or tragically far apart, like when Winnie Mandela shows up.

It's an epic fictionalised take on events, and one I hope Ashton will come to be known for.

[The Archbishop and the Antichrist](#) is the second part in the [Synergy Theatre](#) series and runs at [Soho Theatre](#) until 21st May.