

New collection has people's touch

CATHY GUSH

Chris Mann has the gift of making the ordinary significant in his poetry. And while many may switch off at the mere thought of poetry, his work is so accessible that everyone can find moments and circumstances to recognise and enjoy. This is particularly true for *Home from Home*, his newly-launched collection of poems, which contains both new work and selected poems from previous works.

Mann's work is further enhanced by music and imagery in a multi-media musical that will be presented as part of Spiritfest during the National Arts Festival.

His wife, well-known artist Julia Skeen, has provided exquisite sepia illustrations that both complement and echo the meaning of the poems.

Mann has turned many of his poems into songs, which are being performed by himself and Nia, an established group of Grahamstown musicians that have already won a number of fans with their unique style. Once again, the composition of this group and the music, a

blend of African jazz and folk, resonates perfectly with the themes of cross-national unity and shared experiences.

However, while there is a feel-good factor about the poems, they are nevertheless thought-provoking and many of them have a satirical or bitter-sweet edge that prevents them from sliding into pure sentimentality.

This is evident in works such as *Third World Dictator*, *Joburg City Late Night Blues* and *Paradise Road*. As the son of a Springbok cricketer, Mann has included a poem entitled *Country Cricket*, with a strong Eastern Cape flavour that locals in particular will enjoy.

Home from Home is the third collaboration by the husband-and-wife team of Mann and Skeen. Their two previous productions, *Horn of Plenty* (1997) and *Lifelines* (2006), focussed on the richness to be found in the animal and plant kingdoms of the earth, and the best of these have been included in the new collection.

Mann's new work focuses largely on people and culture, and is an attempt to build bridges, to emphasise a shared

African heritage and identity even within diversity. It is work that can be enjoyed at many different levels, but ultimately it is food for the soul. It is fitting, therefore, that it should be performed as part of Spiritfest.

Mann has a very established reputation in the South African literary world. The first person to be appointed an Honorary Professor of Poetry at Rhodes University in 2006, he has now been nominated for a similar position at Oxford University.

He is also well known as the co-ordinator of Wordfest, the popular and wide-ranging literary festival-within-the-Festival, and has promoted literary festivals in a number of other areas. The couple took *Lifelines* on tour around South Africa and the UK in 2006, and will do the same again for *Home from Home*, with large numbers of young people benefitting from their performances.

The musical performance of *Home from Home* gets feet tapping and even people singing along. It's hard to remain untouched by these song-poems when there are so many things that one can identify with.



SWEET TALKIN'... Chris Mann and members of the band, Nia: Sebastian Jamieson and Zenzo Simbao rehearse for the musical *Home from Home* that premieres at the Festival this week.

Photo: aMan Cohen

An altogether uplifting experience and one not to be missed at

Festival.

For more details of the show

and how to obtain copies, visit the website www.chrismann.co.za