JM Coetzee stumps Wits

JACKIE MAY

OUTSIDE the Great Hall at the University of the Witwatersrand yesterday morning people were baffled and bemused by JM Coetzee’s speech.

Many of them were trying to decipher why, after being awarded an honorary doctorate in literature, the acclaimed author appealed to young men to join the teaching profession.

To a hall packed with parents and students receiving their degrees in the humanities, science, commerce, law and management, Coetzee, who doesn’t often speak in public, said: “I want to appeal to the idealism of those young men who are already contemplating a career in education and suggest that you think seriously about going into the teaching of young children.

“It’s not hard to make the case that it will be good for your soul to be with small children.”

He said a man who wanted to pursue teaching as a profession should be “applauded and assisted on his way, rather than being treated as a potential abuser of the innocence of his charges”.

Writer Richard Poplak commented afterwards, “It was outrageous. I was flabbergasted. Apart from the intellectual disappointment, it felt like the first bite of the fruitcake which will be the rest of Coetzee’s intellectual life.

“I don’t know what he was trying to say. It was like a big postmodern joke, and we were all the players. But, for a man of his intellectual stature, I don’t think this is what he was trying to do,” he added.

Other critics who felt short-changed said that the audience had perhaps been “Costelloed” — a reference to Coetzee’s imaginary protagonist of his novel of the same name, Elizabeth Costello.

Costello, in the novel, delivers speeches at literary conferences and rarely manages to tell people what they want to hear.

But some people thought that the speech had its merits, recognising the gap in the teaching profession.

“Never in history,” said Coetzee, “has there been more need for hard-working, dedicated, good-humoured, loving teachers.”

Eusebius McKaiser, political and social analyst at the Wits Centre for Ethics, found the speech “beautiful and perceptive”.

Coetzee, said McKaiser, identified that men are not going into teaching and that, by being taught by both men and women, children experience the fullness of being human.

Coetzee lives in Adelaide, South Australia.

● See Page 17