

Athol Fugard and the new South Africa

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'The new South Africa' is, of course, a relative term. The country is in a state of transition and its final shape and destination is to say the least uncertain. Nonetheless, in a country that is so highly politicised, Fugard's storytelling and playwriting inevitably reflect contemporary issues and turbulence. I hope to show that Fugard's post-apartheid play, *Valley Song*, resonates with meanings directly inspired by or attributable to the new dispensation prevailing in his country. I also plan to show briefly and retrospectively that certain themes have engaged and continue to engage this master playwright.

Whether Fugard merely holds up a mirror to the deep-rooted foibles of his world, or whether he foreshadows future developments, he consistently informs his work with warmth and compassion. Although a regional writer—nearly all his plays have emerged from a specific corner of the Eastern Cape in South Africa where he has his home and where he lives when he is not travelling with his work—he has universal significance and appeal.

For four decades during the apartheid years, Fugard's work spoke for the disenfranchised, the dispossessed. Now there is a strong element of hope in his work that reflects his optimism about the future. Fugard and South Africa are indivisible. It is the land itself, if not the very soil, that has continued to generate his characters. By observing and chronicling the devastating effects of the country's iniquitous laws on the lives of ordinary people, Fugard created a moving testimony to human endurance.

In the final analysis, notwithstanding his literary and dramatic gifts, Fugard remains an impressive, honest and committed witness to the world around him. His work bears testimony to the suffering

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and aspirations of everyday people. He has given names to the nameless and life to those who would otherwise have been passing and ephemeral shadows. He has been an unofficial historian of a time and place, recording with acute insight the tumult that engulfed a nation for forty years. The sounds, shapes and smells of a harsh terrain are accurately reflected in his dramatic works. It is the territory of the South African heart and mind, as well as the landscape of a people's psyche that he has charted so well. For most of his creative life, the country's soul—and its schisms, facts and fantasies—was the region he explored in a succession of plays that mirrored the contemporary realities.

Fugard's insight was honed by a lifetime of conflict with South African authorities, including the withdrawal of his passport and the censorship of his plays. Yet he took up his pen not with the fervour of a social critic or reformer but primarily with the passion of a storyteller. It was this compulsion that ultimately ensured his work's appeal and validity, notwithstanding local speech inflections, the liberal use of indigenous language and the range of portraits instantly accessible and recognisable to most South Africans. The stories he told in words dense with the ambiguity of poetry, in phrases that linger in the mind, are tales reflecting South Africa in all its complexity: the absurdity of laws that wreck hopes and dreams, loves and lives, the segmented apartheid world dividing brother from brother powerfully projected in his first major play *The Blood Knot*, the intrusion of destructive legislation and the subsequent alienation of man from woman in *Statements after an Arrest Under the Immorality Act*, as well as the gulf cleaving the haves from the havenots in *Hello and Goodbye*.

Fugard confronted concerns at grassroots level. His plays germinated in a myriad impressions meticulously recorded in his *Notebooks*, which impress with their honesty, the precision of his observations and the relentless probing of an enquiring spirit. In his *Notebooks* and in all his plays, he acknowledged complicity, shared the blame and expiated the guilt, proclaiming 'mea culpa' loudly and clearly. He addressed issues that threatened to engulf South Africa, focusing on the victims of society, and the many

guises of prejudice, resentment, hatred, fear, deprivation and suffering.

For so many years Fugard was an artist enshrouded in gloom, a man himself the prey of melancholy, a darkness he delineated powerfully in the film script *The Guest*, his portrait of Eugene Marais, Afrikanerdom's brilliant scientist, naturalist and drug addict. Marais propounded a theory of what he termed Hesperian depression, the sadness that sweeps over one with the advent of darkness. Fugard incorporated this concept, which reinforced a sense of mortality that was at one with the dark side of Fugard's spirit and work. This doom syndrome was compounded by the playwright's own lengthy addiction to alcohol, on which he relied heavily, believing that it catalysed so many of his plays. It is significant that with abstinence and sobriety, motifs of light and hope began to emerge, culminating in the wondrous light imagery so central to his play *The Road to Mecca*.

Mecca was the first of Fugard's plays to be set in Nieu Bethesda, a small Karoo village where Fugard has a house to which he still goes and where he does a considerable amount of his writing. The story revolves around the work of a remarkable woman, Helen Martins, who turned her home into what is now commonly referred to in the village and beyond as the Owl House, with concrete representations of owls on the verandah and a back yard filled with statues of wise men, camels, figures, shrines and esoteric figures. The interior of her home was similarly transformed with mirrors and walls encrusted with glass fragments. At the heart of her world was a belief in the spiritual progression to a personal Mecca. To step into that house is to be caught up in a world of prismatic light so symbolic of the enlightenment she craved. In this small Karoo village, her divergence from Calvinist norms was viewed with extreme mistrust by the villagers.

Fugard in his walks around the village had once or twice glimpsed the bird-like figure of Miss Helen. After her suicide, Fugard wrote *The Road to Mecca*, once again infusing his own meanings into the external structure suggested by her life. For many years, *Mecca* came closest to laying bare his secret fear of the sterility that could potentially stifle creativity, the nemesis of

writer's block so dreaded by all writers. Fugard's career had been a painful exploration of milestones along his route to a personal Mecca, and through the play and the confrontations at its core, he and we achieve self-knowledge and move forward to a greater understanding of concepts such as mutual trust and acceptance.

After *Mecca*, Fugard wrote *A Place with the Pigs*, a personal parable which he told me was all about his own pigsty of alcohol addiction, and the fear and cowardice that made him turn to a bottle of bourbon in his attempt to avoid confronting the world. In creating this play, Fugard was provoked by the true story of Pavel Navrotsky, a deserter from the Soviet army in the Second World War, who spent 41 years hiding in a pigsty. But of course the pigsty is an image that resonates symbolically on many levels, and therefore it can also be viewed as a metaphor for the apartheid years, or any totalitarian regime that imprisons the human soul in degradation and bestiality.

Although the play is primarily a personal statement about Fugard's addiction, it is not focused exclusively on negativities. While Fugard naturally enough had intimate understanding of the depths of degradation to which he had sunk, he also believed intuitively and strongly that he could ascend from those depths—just as South Africa has done so recently—and it is this insight that informs the play and gives it a visionary and prophetic focus.

In an interview I conducted in Sydney in May 1996, Fugard recalled a quotation by Camus, who said that murder was the most exhausting of all human acts. 'I certainly believe that fear is the most exhausting of all human emotions,' Fugard said. 'My dream is of arriving at a state in which fear is no longer a reality in my life. Because it has been for as long as I can remember.' But Fugard recognises that white South African fear, apprehension and anxiety unfortunately remain characteristic of white South Africa's attitude to the situation in the country, just as impatience remains characteristic of the majority of black people, who feel things are not changing as quickly as they should.

A Place with the Pigs was followed by two plays, *My Children My Africa* and *Playland*, both dealing directly or indirectly with the issues of impending changes for good or ill and alluding to

the prospects for reconciliation and, indeed, absolution. For at the heart of every Fugard play there is that climactic moment of absolution, an old-fashioned catharsis not only for the protagonists of the drama but also for the theatregoers.

In both these politically articulate plays, *My Children My Africa* and *Playland*, Fugard foreshadows the new and free South Africa. The concept of freedom has consistently illuminated the body of Fugard's work. The first time he used it with a full resonance was in an early and strongly autobiographical play *Boesman and Lena*. 'Freedom,' says Boesman, 'is a big word.'

In *My Children My Africa*, the struggle for freedom is a dominant theme despite the tragic circumstances that enmesh and threaten to confound the three characters, a black schoolmaster, Mr M, his pupil, Thami, and a young white pupil from the other side of town, Isabel. Their interaction provides a microcosm of the political forces that threaten to tear the country and its peoples apart. Despite overwhelming devastation, the play ends hopefully with an affirmation of unity by Isabel, who embodies the unvanquished optimism of youth, an affirmation of hope arising from the ashes of racial conflagration.

Playland, which came to Sydney's Belvoir Theatre in 1994, is an explicit allegory about South Africa's recent past. A two-hander, it is set in 1989 in a fairground, an escapist and diversionary locality especially at a time when those who truly wished to see could have read the writing on the wall. It concerns the burdens of conscience and consciousness that plague a black night watchman and a white soldier, the former having murdered a white man and the latter having killed SWAPO 'terrorists' in South Africa's border war. Ultimately the play is a confessional within which both men acknowledge their acts, thereby seeking to understand them and, finally, soliciting forgiveness so that together they can move forward, a prefiguration of the unity so characteristic of *Valley Song*'s final moments and words. Fugard has gone on record as saying that one of the great tragedies of South Africa has been the fund of goodwill, tolerance and patience that the whites squandered. *Playland*'s recipe for the country's future is that whites should recognise and genuinely atone for the

past, and that blacks must have the generosity of spirit to forgive.

In tuning in to the themes of reconciliation and forgiveness, Fugard indirectly yet fortuitously foreshadowed themes underlying the formation of South Africa's Truth Commission now headed by Bishop Desmond Tutu, which is in the process of chronicling the pain of the country's victims and the atonement of the criminal perpetrators. When I spoke to Fugard recently, we discussed this prescient conjunction of theatre and political realities. 'Quite frankly,' he said, 'I think the most significant exercises in truth and reconciliation will come from artists, not from legally constituted government commissions or committees. I don't believe there is a genuine healing process involved in what Bishop Tutu is doing at the moment. I don't think it penetrates as deeply into the psyche and the soul as a work of art can. And I claim that for *Playland*.' Until their moment of absolution, the two characters in *Playland* are undeniably trapped in a karma of violence so characteristic of South Africa. The question for Fugard is whether they in their individual lives and South Africa collectively can escape this violence. Fugard clearly believes they can but that it requires a painful and courageous confrontation with the truth.

But now let us turn to the political arena and to the miraculous and relatively recent events that precipitated the transformation of the turbulent mass disaffection and unrest, as well as the cruelties and iniquities of the apartheid era, into a highly improbable but wonderfully democratic scenario. The events had been heralded for some time by the undoubted prophet of his movement and time, Nelson Mandela. With his release in 1990, the ice thawed, spring came to South Africa and the hearts of its inhabitants and a new emotion took hold—hope.

There had been so many setbacks, so much suffering, such intensity of hatred and violence, that it was difficult to believe that it was truly the dawn of a new age. Despite the potential for widespread bloodshed, the transition to a democratic South Africa was relatively peaceful and moreover accomplished not by revolutionary means but by evolutionary constitutional changes that enfranchised the silent majority, who would be silent no more. It was at this time that literary critics, journalists and others

alluded to and pontificated on the effect of these changes on the career of Fugard as a playwright. Would he, now deprived of his customary apartheid parameters, recede into oblivion? It was a question very much on my mind when I returned to South Africa earlier this year.

I left South Africa in 1989, at the height of all the uncertainties, to migrate to Australia. In March 1996 I flew to Port Elizabeth, Fugard's home town. Several years before, the city had proudly conferred on him its freedom and the university of Port Elizabeth had given him an honorary doctorate. He grew up there and the city forms a celebratory backdrop in a prose memoir titled *Cousins*, the story of his relationship with Johnnie and Garth. The work illustrates quite forcefully how the city in which he grew up fuelled his creativity in diverse ways.

The city features prominently in *Hello and Goodbye, A Lesson from Aloes* and the autobiographical *Master Harold and the Boys*. He has mastered the code of one place and time, Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape. 'Put me on a street corner of New York or London or Toronto or Amsterdam ... and I am at a complete loss to make any real sense of the tide of humanity flowing past me on the pavement,' Fugard wrote. 'But put me on a street corner in Port Elizabeth and it is a completely different matter. That young African woman hurrying desperately down Russel Road in the late afternoon ... I know all the possible white families whose houses she could have cleaned that day and I could itemise for you the pile of dirty washing that kept her bent over a zinc tub in the backyard all afternoon.'

In Port Elizabeth, Fugard was never very far from my mind. Soon after my arrival I learnt of the great success and international acclaim that had greeted his latest play, *Valley Song*. When I heard that on the completion of the play's run at the Royal Court Theatre in London Fugard would be returning to South Africa to play at an Afrikaans culture festival in a small town called Oudtshoorn, I was determined to see the play. It was a seemingly endless coach ride from Port Elizabeth to Mossel Bay, the best part of a day, from where I yet again took a shuttle bus to Oudtshoorn. In the late afternoon, the scenery was spectacular as

we ascended the mountains that ring the town. Proteas cascaded in all their glory down the slopes adjacent to the road. It was archetypal South African beauty and a prelude to what I was to see—not once but twice—that night on the stage of, ironically, a South African Defence Force theatre.

What I saw moved me profoundly. It was Fugard with a new voice of hope. In his preferred format, a two-hander, playing opposite Esmeralda Bihl, Fugard, as playwright, director and actor, alternated skilfully and convincingly between two roles, that of a Coloured grandfather and that of an author, unabashedly Fugard himself. The play is rooted in South Africa from whence all his inspiration and characters have come. The plot is simple enough—the desire of a young girl to leave the constraints and boredom of a Karoo village in order to fulfil her dream of becoming a singing star. Fugard, as her old grandfather, portrays a man with a strong connection to the land, a man conservative and traditional in his values and lifestyle. It is only by reluctantly letting his granddaughter go that paradoxically he preserves his hold on her. It is a parable of the old and the new South Africa, a parable conveyed in straightforward dialogue that at times merges with poetry, and the action springs from sincere and strong convictions.

Fugard's second character in the play, that of the author, is narrator, gentle inquisitor, devil's advocate and, ultimately, the triumphant embodiment of the desire to move harmoniously in a new direction, to safeguard the future, to create linkages between the races so that the new South Africa can germinate and come to fruition.

That night in Oudtshoorn was unforgettable for me. The audience was Afrikaans and, for that reason Fugard spoke much of the play's dialogue in Afrikaans although the play was first written in English. This gave the play an added authenticity.

The Oudtshoorn audience was like no other. Here were the very people whose leaders had ceded power, the people who, like the old man on that stage, had had to learn to accept change and let go of the past whether confidently, reluctantly or fearfully.

The long monologues seemed peculiarly apt in Afrikaans, reflecting as they did Fugard's dominant background, a cultural

half of himself that has undeniably influenced his vision. This congruence with and sensitivity to his Afrikaaner heritage was highlighted in the play's biblical passages that rolled so rhythmically and resoundingly off the tongue of the author. Fugard acknowledges that his Calvinist psyche drives the creation of many of his plays and surfaces consistently in such characters as the dominie, the Afrikaans minister, a character so crucial to the development of not only *Valley Song* but also *The Road to Mecca*. Those dominie characters are truly the personification of the Calvinist element in Fugard's persona. But the rigorous fundamentalism of Bible punchers has always been offset by the lyrical and visionary components of his plays. Fugard, like young Veronica in *Valley Song*, knows how to dream properly. His dream in this latter instance concerns the emergence of the fragile new democracy and its future viability in the international community.

Fugard has been attacked by the radical left, who resent the fact that he has presumed to speak for the oppressed and has consistently claimed their struggle as his own. It is an accusation Fugard defuses by affirming the power of the artistic imagination. Surely, he reasons, a playwright can bridge the gap as much between white and black as between genders. Should he be persuaded otherwise, he would succumb to a mentality that defines borders, that compartmentalises and pigeonholes, the very *raison d'être* of the apartheid regime, which he so vigorously opposed. In Sydney, he described this fundamental tenet of his literary theory as follows: 'Give me wings, allow me to leave the limits of my own experience and fly. If I'm going to say the nature of your experience because of your skin colour is of a radically different order and impenetrable to me by virtue of my skin colour, then I'm making the first step towards the endorsement of a theory of separation.'

It is ironic that a man who for so many decades was censored and hounded by right-wing white nationalist governments for his allegedly subversive views and activities should at the same time have become the target of black militants for whom he was either not radical enough or otherwise too paternalistic in his well-

intentioned but allegedly offensive liberalism. Fortunately, Fugard has remained true to himself and has never listened to his critics on either end of the political spectrum or those from the ranks of the literati, many of whom at the outset of his career advised him to abjure the regional specifics in his plays in order to access international audiences. Fortunately, too, Fugard has never viewed his plays as vehicles for polemics or propaganda. The truths of his plays come from the human condition not from the sloganeering of political parties. He has shown great courage in leaving safe areas and formulas to explore new territories, in a constant quest to reinvent himself in literary and dramatic terms. Yet any questions he asks or answers given are contained in the dramatic details of lives lived here and now. However abstracted the philosophical considerations, the specifics remain.

In 1976, Fugard wrote: 'The only truth any man can tell is his own.' Through the plays, Fugard externalises his own inner truths. For decades, his theatre of defiance consistently aroused the national conscience, his audiences accepting moral responsibility for the deplorable conditions he defined. With every performance, Fugard sowed a seed that germinated amid the depravity of a moral wasteland created by apartheid. Yet woven into the poetic imagery of his plays were observations and truths for all men. As the quintessential actor/director/playwright, the stage is his arena for life's battles, where conflicts are resolved and philosophical perspectives established.

Fugard is now on a new threshold. And for him, the changes in South Africa present the prospect of travelling in new directions. 'We have a terrible past behind us,' he told an audience at Sydney's Wharf Theatre, 'and we have made a couple of incredibly bold strides towards a new identity. But we have not arrived there yet. Ahead of us lies a long and very difficult road. You have to put your hands on your life and on your world. That is all you've got.' With the new South Africa, Fugard will continue his acts of social diagnosis, as well as his exploration of himself.

Before we parted at Circular Quay, he said 'When I finally put down my pen and say it's all over, I would like to know that I have kept most of the big appointments that I had to keep as a

writer. Because that is the sense I've had of my writing, of keeping appointments.' Without gazing into a crystal ball, one can predict with certainty that those appointments will be within a changing South African context. Away from his country, Fugard would wither and die. As we have seen in *Valley Song*, Fugard uses the landscape to lead us to the soul of his people. And, inevitably in a country where every gesture, action and story is highly politicised, his plays will surely continue to have a political resonance. Above all, Fugard will continue to bear witness to the lives of ordinary people, as he did with Veronica, the young girl in *Valley Song*, who had faith in her ability to make a dream or a vision come true.

The Author in *Valley Song* concedes that the future belongs to the young girl and the generation she represents. 'There was a time when it was mine, when I dreamt about it the way you do,' he says. 'Not any more. I've just about used up all of the glorious future I once had. It isn't something you let go of easily. I'm still trying to hold onto it.' But as a dramatist, Fugard has declared that he has no intention of being a literary redundancy in the new South Africa. With conviction, the author in *Valley Song* states: 'Another spring has come and we are still here! Still strong enough to go out there and plant!'

Before I returned to Australia in March 1996, I visited Nieu Bethesda, the little Karoo village that is the setting for Fugard's *The Road to Mecca* and *Valley Song*. Just before reaching the village, the road turns suddenly, revealing a landscape of rolling hills unfolding and receding to the horizon. The rust-red earth is covered by a stubble of grass and thorn trees. Time seems to stand still in a landscape of mountains with rocks bleached by the fierce Karoo sun. From this place has come Fugard's new message, so different from his passionate indictment over the years of the iniquities of a racist system responsible for so much human suffering. *Valley Song's* message of hope has illuminated the contemporary South Africa as effectively as his anti-apartheid plays have dissected the conflict-ridden psyche of his people through decades of oppression.

Like the old grandfather in *Valley Song*, Fugard's life is deeply

rooted in the soil of South Africa. In ringing words, the old man says: 'When it's like that between you and a piece of land, you end up being a part of it. Your soul wilts and withers with the young plants during the droughts. You feel the late frosts as if it was your skin that had been burnt black. And when it rains you rejoice and your heart swells with sweetness like the fruit on the trees.' For Fugard the drought is over, the times are fruitful and he rejoices in a celebratory style that marks a new era for the playwright and for his country.

Through *Valley Song* Fugard maintains he has experienced a sense of renewal and rejuvenation, as if he is about to embark on another cycle of plays. He toys with the idea of a comedy that celebrates the absurdity of life.

'I'm no longer blinkered by my obsession with the apartheid years,' he concludes. 'And I have a feeling that one of the consequences of that might be that I address myself to a broader canvas.' Whatever Fugard's future directions might be, one thing is certain, his plays will enter people's minds and hearts, but above all, their dreams.