Athol Fugard – South African playwright of international repute

ROBERT VON LUCIUS

This year Athol Fugard celebrates his sixtieth birthday. As one of the world's leading playwrights, he has gained an international reputation despite the fact that most of his plays are deeply rooted in the South African situation, more particularly in the eastern Cape. A leading liberal thinker, Fugard has combined opposition to apartheid with an insistence on the independence of the artist from politics. His most recent play, "Playland" premiering in Johannesburg, picks up many of the enduring themes that characterise this great dramatist's earlier works. It crowns a lifetime of achievement, one commemorated this year not in South Africa, but in Atlanta, Georgia, with the holding of a six-week Fugard festival.

Robert von Lucius is South Africa correspondent for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

Is Athol Fugard an Old Testament prophet, as *The New Yorker* sees him? Does he feel at ease being described, by the magazine *Time* as the greatest active playwright in English? Athol Fugard would smile mildly and reply that he is a regional writer from the eastern Cape, unable to write when away from his South African soil. He shuns adulation. Theatres in the United States, though, stage his plays more often than anybody else's except Shakespeare. A leading German theatre guidebook writes that Fugard is the preferred author of German studio stages. Fugard's chiselled yet down-to-earth language, his spontaneity and energy, civility and modesty, his courageous and balanced statements, his ability to create trust and atmosphere, enhance the feeling that one has here a great man who imparts values and sets standards.

Athol Fugard describes himself as an outsider, a loner. When asked about his relationship with the Nobel Prize winner for literature, Nadine Gordimer, he smiles knowingly. He sees her and himself as the two poles in South Africa between which all other artists can find a place. She believes passionately that a writer must engage herself, be involved. He, in contrast, does not belong to any political party or writer's guild, and has never done so, believing that the artist must be alone. Artists should be left to look after themselves. "When it comes to art", he says, "nobody has the right to make rules for another." He shies away from public appearances.

Fugard and Gordimer are the two most prominent names in South African literature. While in prose Gordimer has her peers – JM Coetzee, André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach are those internationally most recognised – Fugard has no one near him. He has formed South African theatre, made it known outside its borders, influenced it, given it strength, direction and self-esteem.

Fugard believes South African theatre is almost unique in its powerful dynamism, its close relationship between events on the stage and the social and political reality on the streets, the "direct and electrifying relationship" between both. Not even in eastern Europe, comparable to South Africa in its dramatic change, are events on the streets so directly reflected in theatre. He regards South Africa as one of the most politicised societies in the world.

Fugard, who in the darkest years had raised his voice for the tormented and suppressed, who had himself fre-

eastern Cape, three different positions on violence, on the might of the word and the sword.

"Playland" - Fugard describes it as an "ugly" play, in contrast with the "beautiful" "Road to Mecca" – also revolves around the "karma of violence", the perceptions of a white man (played by Sean Taylor at the Market Theatre) and a black man (acted by John Kani) about violence they had committed, their urge to exorcise their past. They meet on New Year's Eve 1989, just before the 2 February speech by President De Klerk, in an amusement fair. Fugard penned the first notes on his Playland idea in his notebook about 25 years ago. But he finished writing only shortly before the start of the rehearsals: he needs pressure to write.

"Playland" – starting at a slow pace, picking up towards the dramatic ending, abounding in images and metaphors – touches the psychological scars young soldiers in the "operational area" in Namibia and Angola had incurred. The language is forthright, occasionaliy mixing sexuality and faith. Fugard as so often uses spoken South African English, intermingled with some Afrikaans. Some more prudish white audiences might be shocked as the Afrikaans ex-soldier Gideon le Roux strongly rejects religion, while the black nightwatchman Martinus Zoeloe, who chooses loneliness to cope with his doubts and guilt, is citing the Scriptures.

Theme of repentance

Gideon asks Martinus for forgiveness "for all Afrikaners". Both open themselves to the world: "Forgive me or kill me. That's the only choice you've got." With this plea Gideon also speaks for South Africa where the easing of race relations, a real and strong search for "the other", is as clear as the cycle of self-destructive violence. The ending artfully avoids obvious solutions and pathos and is thus all the more touching. For some of the viewers apparently the emotional ending is so intense that they find it difficult to bear. Loyalty and betrayal, Fugard's themes of the previous decade, are no longer prevalent, the autobiographical element is missing as well. Does Fugard see "Playland" as a symbol for South Africa, a world of superficialities and turbulence that shies away from getting to the core, that drowns doubts in play and bustle?

South African reviews of "Playland" were unusually uniform. They spoke of the most important work by Fugard for decades, being forceful, monumental, visionary. At its premiere South African opposition politicians thronged the audience, from the former leader of the liberal opposition, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, to the chief of staff of the guerrilla wing of the African National Congress, Siphiwe Nyanda. Government politicians are hardly ever to be seen in the Market Theatre; they seem to prefer (if they take any interest in arts or entertainment at all) the more established and less challenging State Theatre in Pretoria.

In "Playland", as in almost all his plays there are only two (or three) characters, here bound by a common feeling of guilt – in his earlier plays usually by ties of blood, love, friendship. This enables him, Fugard says, to peel off layers, one after another. But there will always be layers left, mystery remains. Almost always, too, the people live in the eastern Cape, and are from different races. Fugard observes and knows the inhabitants around him, their reactions and motivations.

More and more Fugard perceives himself to be an Afrikaner. From his Anglo-Irish father he inherited the English language used at his home, and from his "almost illiterate" peasant mother, emotions and psyche. She was a staunch opponent of race discrimination, based on her respect for life. Fugard sees himself as an Afrikaner renegade, a bastardised Afrikaner. Many of his plays of the eighties and nineties – "Aloes", "Mecca", "Pigs", "Playland" – deal with the psyche of the Afrikaner. If the "new South Africa" has no place for this "African tribe", he says, there would be no place in it for him, either.

quently been on the receiving end of state repression, says he is occasionally asked whether the end of apartheid has not put him out of work. Such a question never fails to amaze him. It not only shows ignorance about South Africa but also about the role of a writer and his relation to society. Though for years he was not allowed to leave his country, he was not an anti-apartheid activist. Fugard writes about victims, about desperate people, the very substance of drama. In a talk at Rhodes University in 1991 on the relationship between the Arts and Society, Fugard said people should ideally leave the theatre "with both head and heart excited".

Ongoing scepticism

Shortly after February 1990, Fugard was awarded one of his many accolades (none yet, though, by his home town Port Elizabeth), an honorary Doctorate of Literature by the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. He then spoke a few sentences for which he has been castigated by some: after forty years of trying to survive the pressures of apartheid society he had brainwashed himself into a set of hard and unyielding political attitudes, characterised by a deep scepticism and distrust of anything coming from government. He suspected that the reform initiative did not represent a change of heart but rather a last-ditch political manoeuvre to stave off the loss of white privilege and political power. The climate of suspicion created by the government in decades of misrule, distrust and deception, the "waste of human lives" had devastated the social fabric and quality of life.

Shortly afterwards, Fugard became unsure whether or not he had been too harsh in his graduation speech. But now, he reflects, he is proud of those words. He will only trust President FW de Klerk when, in his view, he accepts his moral responsibility and publicly asks forgiveness for the evil of apartheid. Apartheid – which he sees as a survival mechanism – was, Fugard alleges, the "first act of violence" in South Africa and thus the basis for later ones. The days of apartheid, he adds, are irrevocably ended, faster than he had expected, whether by negotiations (which had until their temporary breakdown made some remarkable progress) or, as in eastern Europe, by the rise of people's power.

Liberalism still under siege

The playwright sees dangers lurking in the "new South Africa". Powerful forces are not interested in values of freedom. Thus his optimism is tempered by the realisation that his set of liberal values are endangered: liberalism in South Africa was and is under siege. Even during the darkest days of apartheid, however, he was "never capable of handing himself over to a pessimistic scenario". The arts, especially theatre, Fugard is convinced, have helped keep liberal values, human dignity, and justice alive. This belies his own belittling description of himself as "the classic example of the impotent white liberal" who is ridden by guilt. Fugard, like Alan Paton and Helen Suzman, can rightfully be called one of the great liberals in recent South African history.

Athol Fugard still feels much power of writing in himself. At 60 he now has the major part of his writing life behind him; but whether it will be the better part he does not know. He has a great urge, an extraordinary energy in this phase of life in South Africa, to return to Port Elizabeth and write a new play about the highly confused uncertain transitory phase of South African history. He is, the newsletter of the National English Literary Museum writes, a prophet in the true sense of the term. He felt "so intensely the pain of his society that, like Jeremiah", he had to remind "his fellow human beings of the suffering of the oppressed and the callousness of the self-righteous". In his writing, Athol Fugard does not follow a strategy but rather the promptings of his heart. In it, he continuously tries to face new challenges, to "turn corners and go new directions . . . at several critical periods" in his writing life.

Unselfconsciousness

On 11 June 1992, his sixtieth birthday, Harold Athol Lannigan Fugard led rehearsals of his new play "Playland" at Johannesburg's Market Theatre. In all his plays he tries to direct the first performance, sometimes also acting, trying to give it his stamp. He continued his direction while various academics at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in July paid tribute to him. He claimed that he would not read their speeches, even at a later stage. He is trying to stay unselfconscious. Until now, he maintains, he has not had an extensive look at the comprehensive bibliographic account of his works, mentioning 3 733 publications until 1990, that has been published by the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown. NELM, situated close to Fugard's homes, has by far the biggest collections of "Fugardiana", including a vast array of press clippings, videos, sound tapes, posters and programmes, translations, and, on loan from Fugard and his wife Sheila, who in some ways brought Fugard to the stage, his manuscripts, notebooks and letters.

Fugard saw the finished film version of his "Road to Mecca" only a few months after it started its cinema circuit. There he plays the priest who does not dare to confess his stealthy love for the eccentric Helen Martins. The recently deceased Yvonne Bryceland – once called the greatest living actress by the British playwright Edward Bond – plays "Miss Helen", who lived secluded in the Karoo hamlet Nieu Bethesda in her Owl House full of sculptures and mirrors. Fugard and Bryceland are joined by Oscar-winning actress Kathy Bates and the South African actor and director Soli Philander in one of the most moving films in South African cinema history. Yvonne Bryceland played many female roles for Fugard. Athol Fugard sees Miss Helen as a self-portrait. In her he tried to understand the drying up of creative energy, which he had once experienced in a writer's

block, a "dreaded moment of darkness", an anguish that still frightens him.

Athol Fugard is not a great friend of film, although some of his works have been filmed for the screen or television. He prefers to see himself as a man of the stage, as playwright, director, actor. Occasionally though he acts in films, for example as Field Marshall Jan Smuts in Richard Attenborough's "Gandhi". As director, Fugard has worked together with Ben Kingsley, who played Gandhi. In "The Killing Fields" he only performed, he jokes, because it was filmed in Thailand and he had never been there. He had the privilege of being a mega-extra and thus having a credit line and being allowed to sit in the producer's air-conditioned van.

Physical setting

Fugard's absorption with Helen Martins started when he bought a house in Nieu Bethesda two years before her death. There the man with alert and piercing eyes found a retreat for contemplation and writing. The austere Karoo landscape and the temporary withdrawal of his passport had helped to concentrate his mind and, he alleges, to get a national identity instead of becoming a "colourless international writer". For him the Karoo "scales human beings down to the right proportion – very sobering and very moving. It's not a world that invites or sustains vanity." He regards the Karoo as the most spiritual of South Africa's landscapes. With his furrowed face, his slight smile in the corners of his eyes and mouth, and a mild and considerate manner, with his hand stroking through his grey beard, he seems to fit into this world. In Nieu Bethesda he has acquired a gravestone on which he envisages as epitaph the words some children shouted while he was running uphill: "Keep it up, old man, you're coming first."

There, in Nieu Bethesda and in Port Elizabeth, Fugard goes into monastic seclusion for months with a strict daily schedule, writing "painfully" slowly with pen and ink. He sees writing as a craft, not an art, and himself as essentially a story-teller. In the beginning there must be innocence, represented by a blank paper – a process he found reinforced in the concepts of Rainer Maria Rilke. The influence this Austrian poet has on him he shares, together with a merciless opposition to apartheid, with Gordimer. When he has time, Fugard might take a collection of Rilke poems translated from the German from his bag and recite the poem "Der Panther". Besides Rilke he admires Samuel Beckett (like him, Fugard seems occasionally a poet of inaction) and Bertolt Brecht, and he lists the playwrights Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller as having influenced his thinking. William Faulkner convinced him to concentrate his dramas on his own world. In pauses between writing he listens to music, which accompanies him on all his travels. Johann Sebastian Bach to him is a towering cathedral, the pinnacle of human achievement.

In his homes in the Karoo village and in the harbour town of Port Elizabeth, plays were conceived and written that were shown on almost every important stage in the world: "Blood Knot", "Hello and Goodbye", "Boesman and Lena", "People are Living There", "The Island", "Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act", "No Good Friday", "A Lesson from Aloes", (the strongly autobiographical) "Master Harold and the Boys", "A Place with the Pigs" (his only work hitherto that has not played in South Africa), "The Road to Mecca", "My Children! My Africa!". Many see his "Sizwe Bansi is Dead" as the beginning of black protest theatre. Sizwe Bansi led Fugard's friends and co-founders of the Serpent Players from New Brighton, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, around the world. Kani, like Bryceland, was lead actor in many of Fugard's plays, as now in "Playland".

International audiences

Soon after the world premiere of Sizwe Bansi in Cape Town in 1972 his following plays were premiered in Great Britain and later the United States. Fugard sees himself as better understood in the United States, that shares with South Africa the experience of racism, than in Britain. In London, occasionally the feeling arises within him that he wants to fight the Anglo-Boer War again. The American temperament he sees as more physical and carnal than the British, and thus closer to that of South Africans. His special role in the US was highlighted in September and October 1992, when "Playland" was the focus of a six-week Fugard festival in Atlanta, Georgia, given to mark his sixtieth birthday, with the mayor and the governor honouring him.

His extraordinary reception on American stages – confirmed by the most extensive study of Fugard's dramas having been published by an American, Russell Vandenbroucke – has influenced his writing and staging in the last decade: his works referred to universal human drama rather than to specific South African laws as in some of his earlier plays. "Sizwe Bansi" had the pass laws at its core, "Statements" the "Immorality" Acts, others the Population Registration Act. On the stage his formerly sparse designs became more elaborate under the influence of his American designer whom he had brought to Johannesburg to design "Playland".

The "ugly" play

"Playland" is the second play whose premiere Fugard awarded to a stage in his home country after an interruption of 14 years. In future he will, he announced, have all his plays shown to home audiences first before taking them abroad. "My Children! My Africa!" which had its premiere at the Market in 1989 led critics to speak of gigantic greatness and noble tragedy, while others said the director Fugard should have cut large sections of the work by the author Fugard. A black teacher of the old school, a township youth, and a liberal white girl reflected, during student unrest in the