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” - it revolves around the “kanna 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 amnesties meeting. 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, occasionally mixing sexuality and faith. Fugard as so often uses spoken South African English, intermingled with some Afrikaans. Some more puissant 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 force to be reckoned with the “other”, is as clear as the cycle of self-destructive violence. The ending artfully avoids obvious solutions and paths 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 unanimous. 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.

“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 them, 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.

A year not in South Africa, but in America, picks up the narrative of the play

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Johannesburg. He then spoke a few sentences for which he has been castigated by some: after forty years of Ongoing scepticism should ideally leave the theatre “with both head and heart excited”.

He suspected that the reform initiative did not represent the “first act of violence” in South Africa and thus the basis for later ones. The days of apartheid, he adds, are allowed to leave his country, he was not an anti-government in eastern Europe, by the rise of people’s power. And his relation to society. Though for years he was not about South Africa but also about the role of a writer 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.

But now, he reflects, he is proud of those words. He felt “so intensely the pain of his society as 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 discussion of the disempowerment that has been 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.

Fugard saw the finished film version of his “Road to Mecca” one or two months after it started to cinema circuit. There he plays the priest who does not dare to confess his earthly love for the eccentric Helen Martins. The recently deceased Yvonne Bryceладен – 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 Bryceладен are (not) less important actors among the South African actor and director Soli Plaatjies in one of the most moving films in South African cinema history.

Yvonne Bryceладен played many female roles for Fugard. Once, in the short story “A Lesson from AJoes“, he had written about a “dreaded moment of darkness”, an anguish that invites or sustains vanity.” He regards the Karoo as the most spiritual of South Africa’s landscapes. With his furrowed face, he has been the centre of many 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 “Keep it up, old man, you’re coming first.”

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. 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.

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: liberal votes are falling at a time when they are needed most. The playwright of the Karoo hamlet Nieu Bethesda in her Owl House full of sculptures and mirrors. Fugard and Bryceладен are (not) less important actors among the South African actor and director Soli Plaatjies in one of the most moving films in South African cinema history.

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In his homes in the Karoo village and in the harbour town of Port Elizabeth, plays were conceived and written that were meant to form an important part in the world: “Blood Knot”, “Hello and Goodbye”, “Boesman and Lena”, “People are Living There”, “The Island”, “State of the Nation” after an Arrest under the Immorality Act”, “No Good Friday”, “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-creators of the Sizwe Bansi Players from New Brighton, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, to name 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. For him Thailand and he had never been there. He had the privilege of being a mega-extra and thus have 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 he met with and alerting pierces eyes for retreat for contemplation and writing. The aus-

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