

Athol Fugard

Reviewed by Leigh Philpson

Besides the American scholar Russell Vandenbroucke, Dennis Walder from the Open University is the only other critic to have written a full book on Athol Fugard. In a broadly sociological approach, Walder stresses the importance of understanding the local social and political context of Fugard's work, thus rejecting the 'universalising' tendency of many critics which, as he says, is 'convenient for preserving the status quo in that country, as well as involving a distortion of the plays' intent and effect.'¹ Unfortunately, however, Athol Fugard is rather short (126 pages) and the critical commentary is brief. Its most useful function is as a comprehensive introduction for newcomers to Fugard. The chapters include an 'Introduction' to South African society, 'Career and Personal Influences', as well as descriptions of and various contemporary critical responses to all Fugard's work from 'No-Good Friday' to 'Master Harold'.

Walder's central criticism of Fugard is that he is a white liberal who believes in the possibility of individual action, even if what he himself saw and experienced ... contradicts this possibility.² He claims that Fugard only really transcends this 'compromised'³ position in his collaborative work with Kani and Ntshona. Of Sizwe Bansi and The Island he says that 'the liberal view that there is always another side to the question gets short shrift in these plays -- as does a certain kind of liberal, when Styles mockingly refers to Buntu as someone always helping people ... Of course Buntu does

help; yet his help is no more than a temporary alleviation of the problem.' ⁴ Walder is less appreciative of those plays which are 'about the white experience, and directed in the first place towards white audiences.' ⁵ There is an assumption here that the experience of whites is far less significant than that of blacks, but surely as whites we will undergo no internal and radical change in our responses to other people's oppressions if we do not face up to our own experiences that Fugard so intimately and honestly portrays?

While acknowledging Fugard's important role 'as witness to the common lot, survivor of that time, that place,' ⁶ Walder expresses doubt as to whether Fugard's desire is really for fundamental structural change. He points out, for example, that 'The idea that humiliation and role-playing are essential for survival permeates Fugard's plays' ⁷ and that 'The Blood Knot' ... also suggest an acceptance of inhumanity and prejudice as permanent features of life. Fugard's ... own sense of the individual's relationship into society and to history is fundamentally pessimistic.' ⁸ He views the cyclical structure of the plays as indicative of the increasing meaninglessness or absurdity of the white liberal individual who is unable to 'effect change in the face of the rising generation of politically conscious blacks.' ⁹

With regard to the above comment, it is at this point pertinent to note a different perspective provided by that radical sociologist of African drama, Biodun Jeyifo:

the constant, invariable point of departure for all his characters is that of a confined victimhood, the whites being no less victims of their rigid, cast-iron restrictions than the other races and communities. And perhaps the most unsettling, searing aspect of Fugard's endless obsession with this conditioned victimhood is that of its extension into the realms of psychological morbidity and what he himself calls 'ontological insecurity'. ¹⁰

Jeyifo furthermore points out that the device of role-deconstruction and roleconstruction is the means whereby:

the few characters in Fugard's plays usually transform themselves into other characters and personalities and the restricted, claustrophobic space of the plays then teams and vibrates with other roles and human contexts. This leads to a thoroughgoing de-totalisation of the inhuman claustrophobic space initially encountered on the surface level of Fugard's plays: the artificial, fragmented totalisations of experience

*which the walls erected by apartheid social-facism create are negated.*¹¹

Jeyifo thus credits the use of role-playing with a more critical function than Walder who sees it as a compromise to racist definitions. To some extent though he does share the ambivalence of Walder's response to Fugard when he questions the circular return to the 'nightmarish reality'¹² which, he feels effectively blots out the experience of spiritual transcendence.

One wishes, however, that, as Jeyifo's chapter does, Walder's book would develop the psycho-social meanings of Fugard's work as deeply and thoroughly as this playwright who for thirty years has produced many of the most insightful and provocative plays of our time deserves.

**Athol Fugard: Macmillan Modern Dramatists Series Editors:
Bruce King and Adele King**

Author: Dennis Walder

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References

- 1 Walder, D. Athol Fugard, p88.
- 2 Ibid, p34.
- 3 Ibid, pl 13.
- 4 Ibid, p87.
- 5 Ibid, p 125.
- 6 Ibid, p 126.
- 7 Ibid, p41.
- 8 Ibid, p62.
- 9 Ibid, p100.
- 10 Jeyifo, B. 1985: 'The Reductive 'Two-Hander' Dramaturgy of Athol Fugard: Aspects of the Art and Society Dialectic.' in **The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama**. New Beacon Books, London, p101.
- 11 Ibid, p 102/103.
- 12 Ibid, pl04.