

Theatre

All the feelings are authentic in *The Road to Mecca*

**The Road to Mecca**  
Citadel — Rice Theatre  
Run ends May 1

**review by Kevin Law**  
The climate that surrounds the small Karoo village of New Bethesda, South Africa, is dry and barren, but *The Road to Mecca*, the last production of the Rice season, is the opposite. It is rich in thematic imagery and performance.

South African playwright Athol Frugard has fashioned an eloquent and moving play about freedom, friendship, and human dignity. The play concerns Miss Helen, an elderly woman living in New Bethesda, and her terse younger friend Elsa Barlow who arrives for a skit visit. What ensues is argument, revelation, and resolution on the lives of these two women and, on an allegorical level, the condition of mankind.

Miss Helen is a sculptress, and she makes unusual sculptures both fragile and original as expressions of freedom and freedom — but she is recently troubled by a darkness of self-doubt. The weakness of life's final stage is frightening and uncertain. This, combined with the fact the local priest and parishioners want her moved to a home, makes for a confused and bewildered character.

Joan Orenstein plays Helen as if the role were a part of her. Orenstein possesses a vulnerable innocence in her portrayal that is almost childlike in quality. She effectively projects a concern with matters of the heart such as love and trust while simultaneously

striving to grope her way out of the enveloping darkness.

Nicola Lipman as Helen's friend Elsa Barlow gets most of the intensity of character in Frugard's script. Elsa is a tense, angry idealist making many rebellious speeches against the social order and injustices of life. She is bitter, too, at being betrayed by a married man, and Lipman dynamically communicates the realism of her character through a convincingly inherent energy of mannerisms and frantic pacing about the room.

Lipman nearly outshines Orenstein in the first act through the sheer force of her portrayal, but she almost becomes lost in self-parody with long-winded speeches in the overly long length of Act I. Such excessiveness however, is subordinate to the overall effect of the play, particularly in view of such notable elements as the warmth of familiarity attached to the interaction of Orenstein's and Lipman's roles. They play off each other very well, not surprising when considering they have worked together before.

Peter Boretski plays Marius Byleveld, the clergyman who tries to forcefully manipulate Helen into a nursing home through his seemingly pragmatic advice. Boretski is fine as the narrow and selfish "dominee"; his sly patronizing smile illustrative of the conceits of the church. Marius is full of moral conviction; he does not understand Helen's need for freedom through imagination, her "road to Mecca".

Helen, however, is able to fight through her fog of indecision, rejecting the pastor's



*Road to Mecca is moving in performance*

Photo Bruce Gardave

powerplay through an eloquent speech about truth and the inner essence that allows her to create, and Boretski grants his character a glimmer of understanding and a touch of sadness, so that Marius becomes neither unrealistically evil or completely mean-spirited, but sympathetic, despite his narrow defensiveness.

Most of the lines in *The Road to Mecca* are

pointed and memorable, and all the actors inject real emotional value into Frugard's dialogue. The result is an actuality of feelings that is rare. Nothing is awkward or artificial, a stifling factor that often diminishes theatre. This play is moving in performance and allegorical in form, and despite a length that could be pared, it is ultimately rewarding for those with patience.

*Rattle in the Dash* is a fun and funky drive

**Rattle in the Dash**  
Phoenix Theatre  
Run ends April 17

**review by P.J. Groeneveldt**  
The play was half over before I realized that the annoying air-conditioner-like humming was a sound effect, intended to be the smoothly purring engine of Brandon's ugly car. Oh, I was busily assembling in my mind a rationale — this loud humming was a symbol for the Rattle in the car's Dash, which was a symbol for the disintegration of the friendship between Carl, a geek, played by Christopher Thomas, and Brandon, a guy who drives like a jerk, played by Bill MacDonald.

Brandon's a cool guy, we must assume. He built his car from junked parts and it works, except for a bit of a rattle, which makes the horrible Carl assume that the car is disintegrating. This idea is fostered also by the fact that the cigarette lighter is non-functional, as well as the radio, and the front passenger window, which was fastened in with masking tape and fell out while Carl was messing with the also non-functional glove compartment.

Brandon announces that the car's name is also Brandon, which would make a person wonder what major structural problems Brandon the man suffers from. One of them would have to be the fact that he is overly trusting. He sets off on a trans-continental car trip to take his buddy to see a girl whom he has known only three days.



*There's more to life than avoiding death.*

Photo Bruce Gardave

This action is believable once you get to know the character of Carl. You've seen something like him in a horror movie, I'm sure — a brain of a ten-year-old transplanted into an adult body. He has filled the back seat of Brandon's car with mysterious boxes.

Carl claims these boxes are full of books, but one later turns out to be stuffed with maple leaves (a gift for his Canadian love). Carl is also enthralled with road maps and

starts calculating distances before the car even pulls out onto the freeway. (Imagine the ten-year-old brain crying repeatedly "Daddy, how much farther?") Stuff of nightmares indeed.

The glaring personality conflict between Carl and Brandon is further strained when Brandon picks up Frank the hitchhiker (Robert Corness). Frank sits in the back seat like a crooked wrestling ref, egging on the es-

calating arguments in the front. This leads to great trouble, although it seems that two people as wildly different as Brandon and Carl would have been at each other's throats within another twenty miles even without the catalyst offered by Frank.

The play ends abruptly. This obviously confused some people at opening night who wandered about the lobby afterwards eating pizza and beer and asking everyone whether it was over or not. The ending might have been better defined if there weren't so many long black pauses between scenes. A rise in the background music would have served better and decreased the confusion considerably.

One thing you may notice about the set of the play is the comforting absence of fuzzy dice on the rearview mirror. Instead, a skull with a broken clock replaces it. (Perhaps a bit of symbolism here, maybe it represents Carl.)

Brandon's head is also messed up. His philosophy is one of fast driving. "The faster you drive, the younger you get." This snaps together curiously with another statement of his: "There is more to life than avoiding death" to form a dangerous assumption that could lead to a person having to be scraped off the grill of an eighteen-wheeler sometime in life.

*Rattle in the Dash* is short, and although you will be tempted to assassinate Carl well before his hour is up, it makes a good evening out.

episodic work entitled "Frieda Buffalocali" which details some of the events leading to the death and burial of a prostitute. One segment of that, my favorite in the book:

one night you slept in the weeds  
under the fire-escape,  
hands clamped  
between your thighs for warmth  
I found you in the morning  
with a grasshopper on your forehead  
interpreting the dream  
behind your eyelids

These poems are made up of a lifetime of experience. Paul Wilson got his essential life experience working at varied jobs. He worked in radio for several years, as well as being a bartender, a postler, and labourer. He now is the Program Director of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild.

Book

*Fire Garden burns bright*

**The Fire Garden**  
by Paul Wilson  
Coteau Books

**review by P. J. Groeneveldt**

*The Fire Garden* is Paul Wilson's first book of poetry, and the fifth book in the Wood Mountain Series of books by new poets.

The works in this book are crisp and consistent, offering varied images ranging from a boarding house to the war in El Salvador. Poets aim for images that stick, and one that definitely does is evoked by "Carnival Stones":

The stones, senior.  
Carefully picked  
from Malaga beaches  
these will kill  
if your aim is good.  
A good cause; we buy  
white carnations  
for the cloak of the virgin  
to carry through our  
village  
on the Holy Week  
of Brotherhood.

I would not hesitate to recommend this book to anyone who enjoys poetry of any kind. Most of the poetry is short, but there are two long pieces. One of these is an

Turn the page  
for the  
Literary  
Supplement