

ROAD TO MECCA: A SHIMMERING WORK OF ART

"The sincerest praise which can be paid **The Road to Mecca** is that the production is a work of art," proclaimed The Globe and Mail of Athol Fugard's latest play when it opened in Toronto last June. Now, Theatre New Brunswick audiences will see for themselves this powerful and touching depiction of an unusual friendship between two amazing women, by the man considered the greatest working playwright in the English-speaking world.

The plays that first won him international notice were angry, evoking apartheid's pass laws and prison system with alternate humor and horror: and they inspired South Africa's white liberals to understand how powerful a political weapon theatre could be. The plays also gave Fugard a reputation as a troublemaker, and he was long harassed by the government and police.

Like many great playwrights, Fugard has matured, leaning towards the inward pursuits of confession and expiation. **THE ROAD TO MECCA**, his first major work about South Africa that has no black characters, is also his most sensitive evocation of the human condition in his unhappy homeland. The country's turmoil and embattlement underlie every confrontation, a thrilling exploration of the tensions between society's right to seek order, and an individual's scorn for conformity.

"This triumphant and uplifting drama is full proof that a mellowed Fugard can evoke injustice

just as poignantly, angrily, and unforgettably as ever." (Time Magazine)

Miss Helen (played by PAT ARMSTRONG) lives in South Africa's beautiful but desolate Karoo country. Following the death of her husband some 15 years

earlier, she has been obsessed with creating exotic sculptures which fill her garden, to the horror of the townspeople, who want everything ordered and unchallenging. Under the guise of concern for her health, they have launched a campaign to drive her from her home, the Mecca she has created, into a retirement house; and she despairs of finding the strength to fight. Fugard moves past the suggestion that she is either a mad woman or a misunderstood eccentric artist. Rather, he asks what inner journey has this woman undertaken in pursuit of her glittering vision of the infinite, and what do her cement demons mean?

Elsa (SUSAN STACKHOUSE), her young schoolteacher friend, is ardently pro-black, reflecting what Fugard describes as "the best about south Africa, an attempt at a genuinely civilized liberalism". Modern and

irreligious, Elsa is convinced that Miss Helen must not surrender her journey towards freedom. She drives 800 miles in response to Miss Helen's barely-disguised cry for help. The two women battle each other, and then the local minister.

The Rev. Marius Bylefeld (JOHN INNES) embodies the spirit and ideology of white south Africans, and

the desperation of confronting an end to the only life they can imagine. An old friend of Miss Helen's, he nevertheless spearheads the movement to relocate the aging fold artist to a seniors' home. On the night in question, he has come seeking Miss Helen's signature on the admission form. Elsa begs her to fight. The battle over Miss Helen's soul is engaged.

TNB's production of the play is directed by **SHARON POLLOCK**, who also directed the season opener, **Blood Relations**. Production design is by Alberta artist and designer **TERRY A. BENNETT**, whose designs for Miss Helen's sculptures have already attracted media attention. Assisting the director is R S V P participant **WILLIAM E. MCKIBBON**.

The Road to Mecca opens at the Playhouse, on Friday, January 20 at 8:00 pm, with a student preview on Thursday, Jan. 19 (All seats just \$3 with student I.D.) followed by the provincial tour starting in Edmundston (Jan 30) and continuing in Campbellton (Jan. 31), Bathurst (Feb. 1), The Miramichi (Feb. 2), Moncton (Feb. 3-7), Sussex (Feb. 8), St. Stephen (Feb. 9) and Saint John (Feb. 10 & 11).

Theatre New Brunswick is pleased to have the generous sponsorship of REPAP underwriting production of **The Road to Mecca**.

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