

A lesson from South Africa



Butler fingers Diakun

Michael Monastyrskij

In creating drama with a political theme, a writer faces two hazards. On the one hand he may oversimplify by dividing his characters into two camps, the good guys and the bad guys. Worse still, he may go to great lengths to describe every detail of a situation and end up boring his audience.

It is a rare play that manages to unite political fairness with good drama. **A Lesson from Aloes** is such a work, because Athol Fugard, the author and director, is able to use the complexities of South Africa to his advantage.

This ability is particularly noticeable in Fugard's characters. For example, Piet (Maurice Podbrey) is a good natured but troubled Afrikaaner. Like the Aloes (a plant native to the veld) that he collects, he defies the hardships that South Africa imposes on those that live there. Too often, this typically Afrikaans quality is shown to be the only worthwhile trait in an otherwise bad people.

Fugard, rather than associating the Afrikaaner's toughness and stubbornness with racism, unites these characteristics with compassion and love. They make

Piet too self-assured to fear the black man. What's more, his confidence allows him to have a sense of humour. Throughout the play Podbrey as Piet speaks with an uncharacteristically likeable Afrikaaner accent, which also supplies the story with some funny moments.

Alex Diakun plays the part of Steve, a coloured (mixed race) and a close friend of Piet. When we learn of Steve's lot under Apartheid, Fugard demonstrates his skill by not allowing the account of the man's plight to degenerate into rhetoric.

From Piet's suffering, and more importantly from the torment his wife, Gladys, undergoes, we see that whites also suffer under the system. Played by Anne Butler, the character is a brilliant creation.

At first she is difficult to understand and one suspects that her portrayal is a combina-

tion of bad acting and bad writing. but as the action proceeds, what seemed like nonsense begins to make sense, and finally, we see that both Butler and Fugard know what they are doing.

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spectacular degree of naturalism. Particularly notable were the performances of Jeff Hayenga as John Merrick and Concetta Tomei as Mrs. Kendal. Hayenga had to portray Merrick's deformities without the use of makeup; he did this skillfully, never letting the audience forget, yet forcing them to be aware of Merrick as a person. Tomei did as magnificent a job, playing the only person to accept Merrick as a human being. These two actors also performed in the most dramatic scene of the play. At the end of the first act, Mrs. Kendal leaves Merrick and,

In short, **A Lesson from Aloes** is a finely-crafted work that one should enjoy. It is currently being staged by Toronto Workshop Productions, 12 Alexander St. through September. Call 925-8640.

being an actress, has prepared herself to shake Merrick's good hand. As the moment approaches an incredible tension occurs as she refuses his good hand and he hesitantly presents his deformed arm. This was one of those wonderful moments which occur so infrequently on the stage; an undeniable tour de force for both actors.

The Elephant Man is honest, sensitive, bizarre, and witty. A study in society and its outlook on others, it should be seen by all who have any amount of social conscience.

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