



# Doing it for Athol: Representation and appropriation in *My Life* <sup>1</sup>

Mary West  
School of Languages  
University of Port Elizabeth  
PORT ELIZABETH  
E-mail: enamew@upe.ac.za

## Abstract

### Doing it for Athol: Representation and appropriation in *My Life*

*Athol Fugard has spoken of his need to start again, as an artist. This new beginning is manifest in the two plays published jointly in 1996, **My Life & Valley Song**. The focus of this article is **My Life**, an innovative workshopped piece, involving five young women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, who offer a selection of "Images and stories from [their] personal biographies" – sub-title of the play. The stories that emerge in the text, I have argued, are not the ones that could have or would have emerged had the actors not been prompted and directed by Fugard. To justify this position a number of questions have been raised: Why did Fugard choose an all-female cast? Why are the actors all so young? What effect did the facilitator have on the actors' willingness to share their stories? How are the concerns of race and gender treated? How are (self-)censorship and (auto-)biography to be understood in terms of the stories told? Fugard has claimed that he did not write this play, that the words and stories come from the actors themselves. The validity of this claim is examined in the light of these questions, and the politics of representation and of authorship are central to the argument.*

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is an adaptation of a chapter in my M.A. dissertation: *Responding to Feminism: Representations of Women in Selected Plays by Athol Fugard* (1995).

## 1. Introduction

*My Life* and *Valley Song*, appearing as companion pieces in 1996, are the two new Fugard plays published so far in the 1990s. Whereas *My Life* (1994) is a collaborative, workshopped piece, *Valley Song* (1995) is a play that began with a script written by Fugard before rehearsals began. Both plays have been received critically with rather less enthusiasm than earlier Fugard works. Dennis Walder (1998:210), in the collection of critical essays entitled *Writing South Africa: Literature, apartheid, and democracy 1970-1995*, has described *My Life* as a “slight work”, but sees it as “hint[ing] at new possibilities for the Fugardian form of theatre”. However, since it has been published, these new possibilities, as well as its general reception, need to be gauged in relation to current theories concerning representational practices. This article aims to show the ways in which Fugard in *My Life* attempts to dislodge certain relations of domination in his depiction of characters/people in a new South African context, while at the same time it aims to expose the ways in which some power relations nevertheless remain unchallenged in his attempts.

## 2. Early collaborative theatre

In order to engage with Fugard’s most recent work it is necessary to trace briefly the development of his dramatic practice. Russell Vandenbroucke (1985) provides an account of Fugard’s movement towards collaborative theatre in the seventies with the plays collected in *Statements: Three Plays* (1974), and of his return to his own single authorship in the eighties. Vandenbroucke quotes Fugard’s assessment of his own work before Grotowski’s *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1969) provided him with other dramatic possibilities:

My work has been so conventional! It involved the *writing* of a play, it involved *setting* that play in terms of local specifics, it involved the actors assuming false identities ... etc. I wanted to turn my back on all that ... (Introduction to *Statements: Three Plays*, 1974).

In the sixties Fugard (1974:xi) relied on himself as author, “first putting the words on paper”, and, amongst others, *Hello and Goodbye, People are Living There* (1968) and *Boesman and Lena* (1969) emerged. It was his experimentation with the Serpent Players in the early seventies that gave rise to the collaborative plays collected in *Statements*. Then, with *Dimetos* (1975), *A Lesson from Aloes* (1978) and the works staged in the eighties, he gives up making plays in the rehearsal room with the actors and returns, as Vandenbroucke (1985:204) suggests, “to a personal statement”.

However, Vandenbroucke’s account of Fugard’s experimentation with these modes of composition offers no real sense of what was lost and what was gained as he moved between the poles of pure authorship and co-author/facilitator of

collaborative theatre, nor how each mode affects the stories that are staged. For example, Fugard's motives for enriching or replacing his own imaginative vision with the ideas of others must surely be linked in important ways to his representations of South African people. That both John Kani and Winston Ntshona are co-authors of *The Island* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, is an indication that these collaborative ventures emerged from Fugard's sense that "speaking for" a black man is inadequate, and that facilitating his "speaking for" himself is more authentic.

If these early collaborations are regarded as Fugard's conscious or unconscious attempts to present authentically the social and political experiences of black South Africans which he depicts in many of his plays, experiences from which, as a white male writer, he would inevitably have been removed, then the further implications of what he attempts in *My Life* are significant. Just as the earlier workshopped dramas show Fugard's moving away from a racist sense of what it must be like to be black, the collaborative venture of *My Life* shows his moving away from a patriarchal sense that he can adequately and authentically depict the experience of women. His return in *Valley Song* to "personal statement" offers other interesting possibilities in examining the politics of his representational practices and the construction of meaning and people's identities, though for the purposes of this article I shall confine myself to the implications of his representation in *My Life*.

### 3. A different kind of collaboration

Fugard (1996:vii) sees *My Life* as a response not only to the world around him, but also to a "personal need". In an interview with Barrie Hough, he emphasises the personal when he ventures, "I'm doing it for Athol" (*Cue*, 1994-07-08). Linked to this personal focus is his aim to "start again" after decades of apartheid, which comes to light in his response about the genesis of *My Life*:

My 40 years as a writer have coincided perfectly with the 40 years of official apartheid, and I've ended up like a conditioned rat with a series of responses to bells and sounds, to uniforms and to government. And these conditioned reflexes are of no use to me in the future. Political and social reality in this country has changed totally, so if I want to go on functioning as a truly living writer, I've got to start again, in the same way as this country is starting again (Gevisser, 1994).

Fugard's aim to "start again" in *My Life* manifests itself in a number of significant ways: he employs a cast of five women – both the number and the gender choice are uncharacteristic of Fugard's previous work. He selects specifically *young* women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, on the threshold of adulthood, whose contributions are likely to be naive. He then permits the cast to

tell their own stories which consist of selected extracts from their diaries. Finally, he puts together a collection of “Images and stories from [their] personal biographies”. Though these items do suggest a new beginning for Fugard, and though the cast may appear to represent and “speak for” themselves, evident in the phrase “personal biographies”, it is my contention that the role of the five cast members is essentially a *representative* one (Fugard, 1996:ix, admits that he wanted the group to reflect the racial composition of our society) and that they are *presented* by Fugard rather than representing themselves. As well as speaking for themselves, they are also required to speak for Fugard. The politics of *representation* is clearly evident in all these roles that the cast members are called upon to play.

#### 4. Whose stories are told?

*My Life* begins with five girls finishing an aerobics session. Each in turn introduces herself by means of an anecdote relating to the start of an average day in the life of an ordinary young girl growing up in Johannesburg around the time of the elections in 1994. As the play progresses, more “images and stories from the personal biographies” of the girls are enacted, culminating in a scene of reconciliation and acceptance of the differences and tensions that their various stories have exposed.

Both the cast and content assist in illuminating Fugard’s theme of reconciliation, yet much has been made of the notion that he did not “author” the play. “The words and stories in *My Life* come from the girls. It’s their own. Rebecca Waddell and I guided them in getting the words down and now delivering them,” says Athol Fugard in an interview with Barrie Hough (*Cue*, 1994-07-08). It is not only Fugard who is adamant that he has not “put [his] hands on the material” (Hough, 1994): in another interview, this time with just the cast and co-director, Rebecca Waddell, it was stressed that Fugard’s role in *My Life* was *not* that of author. Heather, the seventeen-year-old white drama student, says, “basically everything we say is everything we said when we started in the rehearsal room,” and Waddell adds, “Nothing came from outside their experience. Everything emerged from inside” (Bowker & West, 1995:54). Yet, convincing as these concurring utterances may seem, and despite Fugard’s emphatic withdrawal from authorial responsibility, it cannot be denied that he is present in *My Life* as patriarchal figure of authority: it is he who selects the cast, sets them the task of recording their daily lives in a diary, and then judges their work by either including it, or discarding it from the final product – proof enough that he envisaged a theme, that of self-revelation and mutual acceptance, both of which, it could be argued, are readily associated stereotypically with women’s roles in society.

The question of authorship is further complicated. The vocabulary and syntax of the young women's speeches as well as the subject matter must be their own, but perhaps the pertinent questions are not who "composed" the piece or whose words or ideas appear in the text, but who "authored" it and what constitutes authorship. Fugard not only emphasises that he did not "write" *My Life*, he also denies that it has the status of a play, referring to it as a "recital" (1996:xi). Ironically then, Fugard, the playwright, claims that he has *not* written something which is *not* a play. One cannot help noticing a hint of defensiveness in this as well as an obscuring of Fugard's role in the production. "Authoring" clearly involves more than putting pen to paper; it includes the power of the author over the text, and the production, as well as the selection of content and actors. There is a sense that Fugard takes on in *My Life* the "authority" to be, at various stages during the process, mediator, inspirer, and manipulator of character and event witnessed on stage. He can also be seen to play the roles of healer, conscience and chronicler of the new nation, roles I shall explore later.

Fugard (1996:xi) offers Pat Schwartz an explanation for the use of "recital" rather than "play":

I was so in love with these five voices telling me their stories that my first vision of the programme was ... something in the nature of a recital ... I literally saw five chairs and music stands and these five girls coming out with their diaries as if they were the scores of a quintet which they were going to play ...

As author, Fugard wants to create harmony out of seemingly discordant cultural and racial contributions. To achieve this he chooses five young women. His desire to create harmony, expressed in the metaphor of a quintet bearing their musical scores and seated at their musical stands, may be closely related to his choice of women to perform the task envisaged by him. It could be argued that it is benevolent sexism responsible for the notion that women will be more likely to create social harmony than men.

Another likely explanation for the use of "recital" is its definition as "a narrative", or "part of a document stating facts" (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1980). This definition would support the documentary, "autobiographical" claim of *My Life*, but it also introduces the question of what "facts" about their lives the young women would have felt comfortable sharing with Fugard as their facilitator. He says, "The quality of trust I received is indeed extraordinary" (Hough, 1994), and:

Those five young women gave me the extraordinary privilege of witnessing their beautiful lives, taking me into those lives, trusting me with their tears and sharing themselves at a very deep level with me and the other members of the group (Fugard, 1996:xi) .

Clearly Fugard does not entertain the possibility that his presence in the workshoping sessions affected the quality and subject matter of the contributions of the group. A member of the cast says of Fugard, "He's open. Almost like he's your father. Those things I told him I never shared with my closest friend" (Hough, 1994). Yet if the cast saw Fugard as a father-figure, there must have been facts that they were unwilling to share with him, and there must also have been that element that is so typical of father/daughter relationships in patriarchal societies: the daughter's need to please, to say what a male parent is likely to approve of. This aspect of the relationship between the director and the cast strongly suggests the capacity of female complicity with patriarchy.

## 5. (Auto-)biography and (self-)censorship

The stories told on stage are the ones Fugard authorised. The only "writing" done by the cast was in their diaries, a task allocated to them by Fugard. These diary entries were made available by means of recording early workshop sessions, and are already a few removes from genuine autobiography: they were written on request, rather than spontaneously; there is no record of what was in fact written on the page but not shared verbally in the sessions; and being relative strangers to one another and to their facilitator, there must have been a reluctance from the cast to share anything but the most superficial accounts of their lives. These gaps and silences alert one to the issue of self-censorship and autobiography. Shoshana Felman, in *What Does a Woman Want?* argues that "... none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography" and offers the following explanation: "Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us ..." (Felman, 1993:14)

In an unofficial interview Fugard (1994) claimed that the girls *did not know what their stories were* and that "their stories would at times consist of just a sentence". The young women may indeed not have known what their stories were, as Felman has argued, but if their stories were hardly *selfevident*, it is difficult to accept that they were evident to Fugard.

Since *My Life* has been placed by Fugard himself as much in the genre of (multiple) autobiography as in drama, it is relevant to cite Philippe Lejeune's comments on "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write". He (Lejeune, 1989:188-189) distinguishes between the writer and the "model", an appropriate term in describing the cast of *My Life*, who become "models" for a new South Africa:

The function of the model is to tell what he knows, to answer questions; he is momentarily relieved of responsibility. By the mere fact that the other listens, notes, questions, and must later take on the composition of the text,

the model is reduced to the state of *source*. Being free from restraints related to written communication, he can let his memory take over.

The writer, on the contrary, is entrusted with the duties of structuring, of control, of communication with the outside .... Condensing, summarising, eliminating the inferior parts, choosing the lines of relevance, establishing order, a progression.

It is in terms of these necessary “authorial” activities in the process described by Lejeune and, in the case of *My Life*, performed by Fugard, that Fugard’s role as mediator must be understood. Lejeune (1989:189) goes on to argue that although “the writer remains faithful to the tone of the model in his oral performance ... it is especially a question of adapting what the model has said to the laws of the genre and to the demand of the public to which it is directed”. Fugard as mediator has been willing to select and adapt the material which he extracted from his “models” in the interests of theatre as well as of the “new South Africa”.

Lejeune further explores the power relationship that exists between writer and model: he sees exploitation by the writer as a consequence of this kind of collaboration, because “models” are excluded from writing and their matter is “appropriated” by the writer. “In writing, as elsewhere, “authority” is always on the side of the one who has the power” (Lejeune, 1989:197). It is evident that such a relationship of “power” exists between Fugard and the cast, in which he has “appropriated” the territory made available to him through their diaries. Fugard’s claim concerning the cast’s status as quasi-authors may be seen as giving them each credit for their contributions, but the charge of appropriation remains relevant: the programme for the Johannesburg production of *My Life* reads as follows:

Images and stories from the personal biographies  
of

SIVAGAMY GOVENDER  
RIANA JACOBS  
HEATHER LEITE  
RESHOKETSWE MAREDI  
ELEANOR BUSI MTHIMUNYE

Staged by  
**ATHOL FUGARD**  
and  
REBECCA WADDELL

The largest type-face is reserved for the name “Athol Fugard” .

Desiree Lewis (1992:15-21) finds “something deeply disturbing about the autobiographical impulse behind much of the teaching, criticism, publishing and editing of ‘expressions’ of black experience ...” and argues that: “[this] is an entrenchment of standard racist oppositions: blacks express, feel and respond; whites observe, explain and consolidate their normativeness”.

Although the young women in *My Life* are not all black, the oppositions that Lewis foregrounds are apparent. The cast “express, feel and respond”, whereas Fugard selects and authorises. In the same article Lewis addresses the question of white, elite academic women “speaking for” “third-world, black, working class women”, or, in Gayatri Spivak’s word, “subalterns”. The question may be asked whether the young women in *My Life* are indeed “subalterns”; in the sense that the young white actor, Heather, is not likely to have suffered racist oppression, she is not. But all five are young and female: none is likely to have felt that she could, unauthorised, present her life story to the public in a theatre. The presence and the interventions of Fugard, a paternal figure of authority, are crucial to the telling of all the life stories.

## 6. The politics of race and gender

As I have already pointed out, Fugard admits that when he embarked on this project he wanted it to reflect a new beginning for himself as an artist. This he manages by choosing a new mode of representation, a different kind of workshopped play, of which he says, “This is a place I’ve never been before” (Hough, 1994). No less important, he wanted *My Life* to be a celebration of the new beginning that the 1994 elections promised the people of this country. To achieve this he selected a cast that would meet the requirements of a New South African cultural and racial mix: two blacks, a coloured, an Indian and a white. The two strategies merge to produce, in Gevisser’s (1995:5) words, “an allegory for reconciliation, one that is to be found not in the narrative of the drama but in its making”. In her last speech, Heather says: “Well, you try to imagine what would happen to you if you met four strangers in a room and began to share. If we are going to build a new country, that is what we have to do, isn’t it?” (Gevisser, 1994: 28). The moral message to all South Africans at the dawning of a new era is clear. The healer and conscience of the nation has clarified it. Even then the reconciliation can only be political. And the only reconciliation between gender groups that can be argued for in *My Life* is that implied by all five young women’s acceptance of Fugard as author and mentor.

Fugard’s selection of only women has been explained in various ways. Rebecca Waddell concludes that Fugard “trusts his instincts” and that he felt “the five of them just spoke to him” (quoted in Bowker & West, 1996: 55), but this explanation leaves one wondering what “instincts” are referred to, and what the



cast spoke of in this vague, intuitive communication they shared with Fugard in the beginning. The choice may also reflect a recognition by Fugard that in a new democratic, non-sexist nation, people (in this case, women of various cultures and racial groups) can and will “speak for” themselves. However, an equally plausible explanation for the selection of a young female cast is revealed in Fugard’s own preconceptions of women. In an unofficial interview with Fugard (1994) I asked about the all-female nature of the cast and his response says much about the roles, in his experience, women generally and stereotypically must play:

I am prejudiced in favour of women. All my female characters are powerful. They affirm life. Unlike my male characters who are all weak. I think it has a lot to do with my personal circumstances. My father was a cripple and an alcoholic. And my mother was a monument, with an innate sense of justice.

I have explored elsewhere and in more detail (West, 1995) the notion that the outstanding feature that appears to characterise many of Fugard’s portrayals of women is simply endurance. Lena must endure her marriage to a man who abuses her. Miss Helen must bear stoically the stigma of being the nutcase of New Bethesda. Millie and Hester must survive being treated merely as objects to satisfy the appetites of men. “Patience”, a minor character in *The Road to Mecca*, seems to symbolise all these women.

The women in *My Life* must learn to tolerate one another. That is part of Fugard’s purpose for them. And what better trait to begin with than this “inbuilt” patience. Being young, the cast members are also likely to be tentative and unassuming, perhaps also approval-seeking and malleable. In short, they have all the qualities necessary for Fugard’s purpose, which is to demonstrate that reconciliation is possible. In both the script and the interview with the cast, there is ample evidence of their tentativeness. Towards the end of the play Heather says that she suspects that the audience has been judging the cast (1996:29); Shoki asks whether the audience is impressed (1996:30); and Riana voices the concern that their bodies were being judged by the audience (1996:31). In the interview, Heather comments on audience response to the play. She remarks:

It’s not easy getting up on stage and telling strangers about yourself. We’ve been doing it for about three months now, and sometimes it is still hard, you know, especially because you are not sure how people are going to take it, or whether they’re going to appreciate it (Bowker & West, 1994:56).

In attempting to understand this lack of confidence, I suggested that the cast must feel vulnerable because they are offering themselves. Rebecca agreed, and added, “it’s hideous when they are rejected” (Bowker & West, 1995:56). Stripped of the comforting anonymity that a fictional character could offer, the cast must certainly have felt exposed. More significantly, in the casting of *girls* in these roles that require of them to act “themselves” rather than a “character”, one

cannot rule out the notion that girls, more willingly than boys, can tolerate feeling exposed and vulnerable. Heather speaks on behalf of the whole group in her final statement, offering their vulnerability as a kind of gift to the audience: "So, here we are, standing in front of you. We have given you our hearts, we have told you our stories, and we were wondering what you were going to do with us" (1996:30). Each of their contributions throughout the performance is an act of offering themselves to the audience, and, in fact, a repeat of the first offering of the self which was made to Fugard.

As Dennis Walder has rightly pointed out in his article entitled "Spinning out the present: narrative, gender and the politics of South African theatre", Fugard, in *My Life*, has "directed attention away from the desire to tell his own [story] .., and towards the potential of the female cultural producer". Walder (1998:210-211) suggests that Fugard may not have been entirely successful, "since theatre-going audiences would have been aware of Fugard's name and presence behind the production". Walder, however, does not examine other ways in which the play's intended purpose of "reflecting and celebrating cultural diversity" are in conflict with concerns of gender in Fugard's selection and ordering of the contributions. The opening speeches of Busi and Shoki, in comparison to those of the other three young women, show how their various stories confirm the emergence of "feminisms" in this country, rather than a singular feminist endeavour. Both Busi and Shoki introduce themselves by offering stories of social communication across racial divides. Gamy's introductory statement contains no reference to social encounters. Unlike Busi, she has no morning aerobics class, and, unlike Shoki, she will not end up in a hotel lounge for "a few drinks and a quiet chat" (1996:7). Gamy begins her day (and her performance) at home in a small temple in prayer (1996:3). Riana introduces herself by describing the start of a normal working day for her family who live in Eldorado Park. Heather starts by recalling childhood experiences of rejection and concludes that they have taught her independence. In each case the cultural identity of the girls is evident, as are Fugard's thematic concerns. The stories are linked by presenting morning activities, although only Heather, the most privileged, is sufficiently empowered to provide an abstract tale. The "others" all relate more practical routine experiences. These differences illustrate the point made by Lewis that there cannot be a homogeneous, universal feminist politics since some women have been more privileged or less oppressed than others.

Each of the accumulated anecdotes offered by the cast and selected by Fugard reveals their responses to the patriarchal world they live in. Busi's story about her encounter with a tokoloshe (1996:21-22) contains interesting implications regarding gender in black South African cultures. Busi explains the incident in vague terms: she recalls that at the age of fourteen she "lost [her] virginity" to a tokoloshe. Not only is her first sexual encounter veiled in terms inherited from

African mythology, but the question of consent is unclear and the implication of rape cannot be overlooked. Busi talks of a “heavy dark atmosphere” approaching her, of a “powerful passion” overcoming her, and of being shocked to discover what had happened to her. In all these details there is a strong suggestion that she was overpowered. Her helplessness is condoned by her mother whose reaction to the incident shows her to be an accomplice in her daughter’s elaborate refusal to take or allocate responsibility for what happened. It is significant that of all the cast members, Busi is the only one to mention sex at all. Fugard’s paternal role and customary reticences before an older man would probably have prevented the others from broaching the subject, just as possibly Busi’s age (one of the oldest at 20) and the strangeness of the tokoloshe story would have provided a cultural licence to talk about sex in front of Fugard. Whether or not he was aware of it, Fugard’s effect here is probably that of censor.

Gender concerns are prevalent in other stories too. Both Riana and Gamy emphasise familial influences that are oppressive, yet neither of them can conceive of an alternative. Riana will continue to worry about her boyfriend’s intentions (1996:23) and clean the house just as surely as her father will see “violence as the only solution” (1996:12) in his dealing with his children and his wife. Gamy does not appear to acknowledge the possibility that her religion and culture contain inhibiting values and practices for women. She explains, in response to the other members of the cast, that she does not feel “trapped” or “cornered”, but “protected” (1996:20). For her age, Heather appears to be confident and independent, yet her contribution to the dream sequence suggests a recognition of the dangers of transgressing patriarchal boundaries: “I dreamt last night that I saw a lot of bearded women running through a cathedral” (1996:8). The suggestion here is that although she, as an observer only in a dream, is not one of them, she perceives an act of rebellion against the strict hierarchical structures of institutionalised and male-dominated Christian practice. In Fugard’s selection and ordering of the stories, it is not surprising that Heather’s statement is directly preceded by Shoki’s account of her rather daring encounter with a chauvinist (1996:7). Gender appears to be as much a part of Fugard’s plot as race and racial reconciliation are.

A different perspective of Fugard’s representational practice in *My Life* is presented by Veronica Bowker who argues that, in this play, Fugard “highlights the issue of “representing” or “speaking on behalf of” others by opening up for scrutiny the creative relationship between writers and cast” (Bowker, 1997:157). She uses Giroux’s *Border Crossing: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (1992) as a theoretical framework within which to explore the value and limitations of Fugard’s experimentation in *My Life*. Bowker (1997:159) sees the play as an attempt to “break down the boundaries between art and life,

performance and recital, in order to create a space for previously silenced voices to be heard". She goes on to suggest that Fugard "... creat[es] the conditions for the cast to become border crossers in the area of representation, [as well as] ... empower[ing] them to understand him as playwright in his own terms" and to understand each other in their own terms (1997:162-163). Fugard's "boundary-breaking" experimentation is clearly evident in *My Life* and Bowker examines the many conventional oppositions that the play challenges, particularly with regard to art/life, youth/age, black/white as well as male/female. Fugard's attempts, however, in the latter opposition have not always succeeded in breaking away from an implicit sexist discourse, as I shall illustrate with reference to Gamy's role in the play.

Gamy's refusal to be coerced by the other cast members illustrates the extent to which gender borders have not been successfully traversed. In exploring the question of whether the subaltern woman can "speak for" herself, Desiree Lewis (1992:18-19) discusses "... mainstream feminists' frequent impatience with third-world or non-western women who, apparently quite unreasonably, insist on collaborating in their own oppression". Gamy's attitude towards patriarchy receives more attention than any of the other stories related by the cast, and their impatience with her "apparently unreasonable" attitude is easily detected. I am not unaware that Lewis's charge could just as well be levelled against me, if I were indeed judging Gamy's lifestyle. It must therefore be noted that it is the impatience of the cast that is under scrutiny. The young women admitted in the interview to setting Gamy up as a target. This was her response:

Yes ... I explained to them (the cast) about my religion and culture, about my family, about the way we live, and they just refused to accept it, and no matter how hard I tried to explain it to them they said no you can't live like that, nobody can be so dedicated to their family. And finally one day I couldn't make it to rehearsals, and *Athol got the four of them to sit on the bench and start talking about how they felt about me*, and they just went on and on (my emphasis – Bowker & West, 1995:58).

In the same interview, Waddell describes the others' reaction to Gamy in her absence as "a sort of hen session on the bench" and on stage Gamy stands apart while they discuss her. She is the only one to undergo this alienation, and its effects must be examined. The reason that Fugard kept the "spontaneous" workshopping experience in the script is clear: it shows tolerance and reconciliation in action. As Gamy attempts to convince the others about her values, it becomes increasingly apparent that they are confronting her with what they perceive to be her complicity with her cultural and familial oppressors to suppress many of her emotions and impulses. The others challenge her about her relationship with her mother, and about her belief in Fate. She says that she "will never go against [her] mother's wishes" and that it is her destiny to marry a

Tamil. She also says that the other young women find their freedom in “breaking away and living their own lives” whereas she finds hers in giving herself to her family and her Tamil tradition (1996:19-20). Yet, even though the others challenge Gamy, they recognise a strength in her that they respect. Busi says that Gamy is “firm and powerful” (1996:15) and Riana agrees (1996:19). Gamy’s conforming to patriarchy seems to empower her, just as resisting it, perhaps because they are so young, makes the others feel vulnerable and unsure.

Just prior to Gamy’s response to the “hen session on the bench”, Riana says: “But I’m telling you all is not lost. I think Gamy is coming out. I really do. I believe that the more Gamy sees of life, the more things are going to change in her life. I can hear it in that scream of hers” (1996:19).

The debate stops there. Any potential to explore the frustrations hidden in Gamy’s scream, or in the others’ silences, is pre-empted by Riana’s statement, and Fugard’s selection of it to end the debate. It is quite clear that the more *all* the young women see of life, the more things will change for all of them, and although their youthful frankness is refreshing and disarming, it is hardly an adequate response to the complex new beginning for South Africa that Fugard wanted the play to reflect.

## 7. Conclusion

In an article entitled “Nothing to Write Home About” an anonymous journalist sums up the current crisis in South African literature: “At the height of white minority rule, a writer ignoring the searing reality of codified injustice risked being labelled irrelevant. Now the focus has become the people of a nation trying to forge a new identity after decades of hatred” (*Daily News*, 1995-03-14; see Anon. 1995).

The same article offers Fugard’s response to the crisis: he says, “The strident voice of protest is no longer the tone of the times”. And Tony Morphet has argued that the “political break of 1990” has “released” readers [and therefore writers] from the “fairly strictly defined bounds of literary duty and political morality” and that they are no longer “subdue[d]” and “directe[d]” by “‘history’ (or a version of it)” (Morphet 1991:166). The project of *My Life* is clearly a response to the demands of a new era. Fugard has defined the task of South African writers as that of reconciliation. And indeed the play exposes real differences in the stories told by the cast, differences in cultural experience for which the policies of apartheid were at least partially responsible. Busi’s shocking story of the hacked off white arm that she saw on an early morning walk in Witbank (1996:25-26) illustrates the violence to which all have been exposed, but of which the black community has been most conscious. Shoki’s story about a school boycott (1996:26-27) is a reminder of the educational deficit caused by

apartheid. Riana mentions her father's violence (1996:12): like Boesman of Fugard's earlier play, he beats his wife (and family) because he is powerless against the real enemy, a racist state. Gamy's resistance to change and her preoccupation with religious and cultural practices may in part be an indication of a marginal group's opting out of the black-white struggle in this country. Heather's unself-conscious adoption of the role of spokesperson throughout the play and the interview is another legacy of apartheid. It might be suggested that it is Fugard's assumptions which make her the spokesperson in the play, but her retention of the role in the interview shows that she is acting in both as her conditioning has led her to do. And so the play moves towards cross-cultural reconciliation.

Although both the cast and the theme of *My Life* are appropriate to the new era of which Fugard wishes to be a part, I have contested his claim that the play is a genuine, multi-autobiographical work. The play should be seen for what it is: a workshopped piece, in which considerable amounts of input have come from the players themselves, but in which Fugard's own "authority" has remained paramount. His claim that he did not "put [his] hands on this material" (Hough, 1994), though it may reveal a genuine attempt to offer a voice to the previously marginalised, is, as I have shown, a denial of the ways in which, as a white male writer, he has shaped the stories, to the extent that they collectively become his version of a new South African story. After all, he did it for Athol. Desiree Lewis, though referring specifically to the experience of black women, provides an appropriate conclusion for my purposes. She writes of black women's right to write themselves saying:

What third-world, black, working class, or any other group of women have to say cannot be allowed to entrench itself as a new orthodoxy, but must be opened up to an expanding non-hierarchical categorisation of positioned interpretations of women's experiences (Lewis, 1992:21).

What she is claiming is that although women of all groups will be allowed literary speech about their own experiences, theirs will not be the only voices which will be considered valid. Other voices, which like those of women, will be positioned, that is to say, their origins, strengths and limitations acknowledged, will enter into dialogue with them. What Fugard has failed to offer in *My Life* is the genuine dialogue with women that Lewis calls for. Whatever the young women's contributions might have been, it appears that Fugard drastically edited the original written and recorded offerings. The cast members might well have been the authors of their diaries, but they were not the authors of *My Life*. Though literature, in its nature, will always offer mediated voices, Fugard has underplayed the extent to which the voices he chose have been censored. Bringing five South Africans together, whether male or female, and from various cultural and racial backgrounds, during a period of extreme social and political

change, would certainly provide potential for good drama, but the five in *My Life* are young, and they are girls. Did Fugard want docility?

## References

- Anon. 1995. Nothing to Write Home About. *Daily News*, March 14.
- Bowker, Veronica. 1997. *A Cultural Studies Perspective on Representation in a 1990s South Africa, with Specific Reference to Academic Transformation and the Work of Athol Fugard*. Port Elizabeth : The University of Port Elizabeth (Ph.D. dissertation.)
- Bowker, V. & West, M. 1995. Interview with the cast of *My Life*. *Current Writing*, 7(1):54-59.
- Felman, Shoshona. 1993. *What Does a Woman Want?* Baltimore : Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fugard, Athol. 1965/1980. *Hello and Goodbye*. In: Fugard, Athol. *Boesman and Lena and Other Plays*. Cape Town : Oxford University Press. p. 171-235.
- Fugard, Athol. 1969/1980. *People are Living There*. In: Fugard, Athol. *Boesman and Lena and Other Plays*. Cape Town : Oxford University Press. p. 99-169.
- Fugard, Athol. 1974. *Statements: Three Plays*. London : Oxford University Press.
- Fugard, Athol. 1980. *Boesman and Lena and Other Plays*. Cape Town : Oxford University Press.
- Fugard, Athol. 1985. *The Road to Mecca*. London : Faber and Faber.
- Fugard, Athol. 1994. Unofficial interview. Interviewer: Mary West. Port Elizabeth.
- Fugard, Athol. 1996. *My Life & Valley Song*. Johannesburg : Witwatersrand University Press.
- Gevisser, Mark. 1994. South African Theater Faces a New World. *The New York Times*, August, 14.
- Giroux, H. 1992. *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and The Politics of Education*. New York : Routledge.
- Hough, Barrie. 1994. Doing it For Athol. *Cue*, July 8.
- Lejeune, Philippe. 1989. *On Autobiography*. (trans.) K. Leary. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press.
- Lewis, Desiree. 1992. The Politics of Feminism in South Africa. *Staffrider*, 10(3):15-21.
- Morphet, Tony. 1991. Book Review. *Current Writing*, 3:166.
- Vandenbroucke, Russell. 1985. *Truths the Hand can Touch: The Theatre World of Athol Fugard*. New York : Theater Communications Group.
- Walder, Dennis. 1998. Spinning out the present: narrative, gender, and the politics of South African Theatre. In: Attridge, Derek & Jolly, Rosemary. (eds.) *Writing South Africa: Literature, apartheid, and democracy, 1970-1995*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press p. 204-220.
- West, Mary. 1995. *Responding to Feminism: Representations of Women in Selected Works by Athol Fugard*. Durban : University of Natal. (M.A. thesis)

