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"A MAN'S SCENERY IS OTHER MEN ..." ATHOL FUGARD'S LATEST PLAYS

ABSTRACT

In this article an attempt is made to indicate that a subtle yet significant shift has occurred in Fugard's work, a shift that manifests itself in the four latest plays. The plays represent, in the opinion of some critics, a movement away from the overtly political plays of the foregoing period, a movement interpreted on the one hand as a weakness and on the other hand as an intensification, a move towards a more symbolic mode. The plays are examined against this background and it is concluded that there is indeed a movement towards a more symbolic preoccupation, but a movement which at the same time involves a more markedly didactic intention, a preoccupation with "lessons".

Fugard's oeuvre has been divided into fairly distinct if overlapping phases. Stephen Gray (1982:17 - 27) distinguishes the following phases: Apprenticeship (up to 1957); social realism (1958 - 1961); chamber theatre (1961 - 1970); improvised theatre (1966 - 1973, the period which contains the most overtly "political" plays) and finally the period of "poetic symbolism" (from 1975 onwards). At one level one could make the point that Fugard's work has become less overtly political ever since the 1976 political riots. Gray subscribes to this view and ascribes this in part to the following: "Fugard seems for the first time removed from social events, ... works (from this period) all show a general stocktaking in Fugard, a man approaching the age of fifty and surveying his past, paring it down anew to the barest essentials" (p. 21).

This categorization is not without problems, however, for Walder (1984:110) is of the opinion that "Fugard's succeeding works (following *The Guest* and *Dimetos*) have been almost excessively clear, even didactic". He also feels that Fugard "sees things from the white liberal point

of view, and is unable to avoid that. His most recent plays ... are obviously about the white experience, and directed in the first place towards white audiences. This is a long way from the achievement of the *Statements* plays" (p. 125).¹ Bowker (1986, personal communication) has suggested, in contrast to the idea that the plays have become less overtly political, that "*Aloes*, with its references to socio-political events such as the Group Areas Act, bannings, house arrests, imprisonment, exit permits, etc. is as overtly political as e.g. *The Blood Knot* with its 'go for white' theme". The categorization *per se* is thus not without problems. It is true, however, that a shift occurs in these plays, and this will be investigated in some detail. Three plays and the film script *Marigolds in August* will be examined in this latter category as described by Gray.

After a period of fairly wide-ranging experimentation (from his involvement in "township" drama to the excursions into myth and experiment in *Orestes* and *Dimetos*) he has returned to what might be termed more conventional dramatic forms: what Walder has chosen to regard as almost "excessively clear, even didactic" works, plays in a familiar realistic mode (coinciding with a return to the "familiar setting, textures and accent of his home environment" (Walder:110). He seems to offer celebratory vitality and renewal on the level of characterization rather than on the formal level, through the intensity of emotion and the deeply-felt human misery that he portrays. He strives, it seems, to transcend the everyday ugliness and to turn it into beauty, and his insistent concern in these later plays has been with human dignity, with trust between people, with the amelioration of loneliness. He renders his characters with a more enveloping sense of compassion, and to my mind his art gains by a relinquishing of stridency and the assumption of a more muted and haunting tone.

The plays to be discussed are *A Lesson from Aloes* (1978), *Marigolds in August* (1980), *Master Harold and the Boys* (1982) and the most recent, *The Road to Mecca* (1985).

¹ He does concede, however, (p. 4) that Fugard has moved away from mere naturalism towards a "more characteristically modern, symbolic realm".

Fugard has always been regarded as the playwright who pre-eminently gives voice to South Africa: "Fugard's plays are all, on some level, more or less explicitly, a protest about the quality of life in South Africa" (Walder, 1984:18). Fugard himself has said that "as a South African I want to talk to other South Africans" (1972). He writes to and about all the people, and he uses language in a way that reflects the multiplicity of linguistic and social codes and traditions in the country. His language is adjusted chameleon-like to the group that he is dealing with, and he uses a conglomerate of Afrikaans and English, interspersed with words from the black vernaculars, to make his dramatic points. Gray feels that "Fugard's particular skills in language manipulation should in the end be assessed against some general theory of language as it applies to the entire spectrum of polylingual polyglot South African society" (1982:25). He is able to manipulate this expressive theatrical language in a wide variety of ways, using shifts in linguistic codes and register, creating functional allusive patterns and at times deliberately spicing his language with colloquialisms that border on the offensive (see Du Preez, 1985, for a penetrating discussion of Fugard's language usage).

In *A Lesson from Aloes* the main character is Piet Bezuidenhout, a bluff, red-faced, big-hearted Afrikaner. Although belonging to the "master race" so decried by the majority of other playwrights in the country, Piet is treated by Fugard with sensitivity and compassion (the play is in fact dedicated to his mother (In celebration of Elizabeth Magdalena Potgieter). The central metaphor in the play is the aloe, a plant distinguished above all for its inordinate capacity for survival in the harshest of possible environments. Fugard uses this metaphor, linked to the metaphor of drought, to illuminate three kinds of responses to the South African situation by three kinds of South Africans.

Piet's most enduring virtues are a quiet humility and utter honesty and integrity, as well as a loving care for other people. This latter virtue has also increasingly become a feature of Fugard's work, for caring and love as a means to obviate hate have come to dominate other concerns in his plays. Piet is intensely involved in the aloes, tending them and *nam-ing* them. For him they represent the hardiness of his people, and in spite of the fact that he has been bereft (by the drought) of his farm,

thus concomitantly of his identity (and his childlessness, within the Afrikaner tradition, also means that his name will die out, except in the name of his Coloured godchild) he shows a stubborn will to survive, in keeping with his beloved aloes. Piet is thus persuasively linked to the essential quality of survival as exemplified by the aloes, even though he sadly acknowledges the truth that his roots will be cramped by being metaphorically (and highly ironically, like his beloved aloes) encased in a tin (his house, called Xanadu). "Piet's manifesto is that his name, his race, his roots will not change ..." (Bowker, 1983: 113).

Piet is forced, however, by the very situation he finds himself in (the South African sociopolitical situation) to involve Gladys at a level where she is unable to function. She is acutely sensitive (a psychological fact echoed and made physiologically explicit by the sensitivity of her skin to the sun), un-South African, and she hates aloes both in nature and in their backyard. She unerringly picks up the limitation of the aloes in relation to Piet: "God has not planted me in a jam tin. He might have cursed you Afrikaners, but not the whole human race" (*Aloes*, p.16). She goes on to describe aloes as being "turgid with violence like everything else in this country" (p. 17). The sexual connotation of this image links her to Piet, and yet ironically presents a comment on the fact that it is precisely Piet's well-meaning "liberal" political efforts which lead to her symbolic "rape" at the hands of the Security Police, and her subsequent escape to the asylum - an escape symbolically represented as "Englishness" by the Sunset in Somerset picture. Whereas Piet's lesson from the aloes is the lesson of survival in the worst conditions (although Walder makes the curiously disparaging remark the "Piet alone retains faith in himself, although it is hard to understand why" (1984:114), Gladys' only real lesson is that she is not like them and thus, with her love of "Englishness and roses", cannot survive the drought. She escapes into the asylum, for although she learns at first to trust through Piet ("You were such a persuasive teacher, Peter! 'Trust, Gladys. Trust yourself. Trust life,'" *Aloes*, p. 27), she also encounters betrayal (real or imagined) and fear through his political involvement.

Steve, the Coloured activist, who is unwillingly leaving South Africa on a one-way exit permit, has been displaced as surely as the aloes in the jam tins, therefore he has to seek his Xanadu elsewhere, and his agony at uprooting himself is evident. His agony is compared to Gladys', and she says to him that "I've discovered hell for myself. It might be hard for you to accept Steven, but you are the not the only one who has been hurt. Politics and black skins don't make the only victims in this country" (p. 62). The pre-occupation with the wounded self is counterpointed by Piet's wistful toast: "What is the odds so long as the fire of the soul is kindled at the taper of conviviality, and the wing of friendship never moults a feather" (p. 32). Piet's sincere attempt to cement this friendship in spite of the lurching awareness that he is suspected of betrayal adds to this impression of goodness and stability, an awareness of the self and others, which is worked out with increasing clarity and precision in the later plays. Love of the neighbour still seems compromised in this play in the sense that there are three progressive steps derived from the "lessons": hope deferred, hopefulness and hopelessness (Bowker, p. 114).

The hopelessness (exemplified in the play by the various retreats, voluntary or involuntary, and described by Walder (1984:119) as having a "mood of paralysis which reflects an inability to face the present, or contemplate the future") inhering in the end of the play is to some extent redeemed by Piet's integrity and his intuitive philosophical coherence. He is reminiscent of a breed of character described by Sheila Roberts (1980) in these terms: "This new evidence in Fugard's work of the irrevocable South Africanness of South Africans, of their tenaciously clinging to a hard earth in an oppressive political situation, is interestingly enough, present in other places: I ask myself whether this inner need to remain ... or to return ... is a phase or the beginning of a large and potentially powerful political homegoing, and whether we will be reading a new literature with roots in the soil, and not twisted ones at that."

Marigolds in August is a film script rather than a play in the conventional sense of the word, in which Fugard captures further haunting images

of life in South Africa. He also creates a memorable character in Paulus, the Coloured "voice of the narrator" in the play. Paulus is a man who has gained serenity and peace in his acceptance of the world and of himself. He lives in the bush, having pared his life down to the essentials, and this choice, consciously made, sets him free. He understands the world without overt bitterness or cynicism (it is important to note that Fugard himself played this role in the filmed version of the play). He wryly accepts the realities of the situation:

Daan: You could be a whiteman, Paulus.

Paulus: I know, I've tried.

Daan: And?

Paulus: It didn't work.

Daan: Marigolds in August ... (p.61)

The central metaphor in the play (disparagingly described by Walder as "somewhat forced horticultural symbolism" — p.119) is the idea of planting marigolds in August. Daan's white employer has instructed him to plant marigolds in August, and he *knows* that it won't work, but he has to do it, even though he is certain that the frost will get them. The inferences here are obvious: Paulus, Daan, Melton are all misfits, because they were "planted" (with all the richly suggestive possibilities of the sociopolitical situation in South Africa) and will as best have a stunted growth. The most unbearably harsh note in this play is introduced by Melton, whose children are dying of hunger and disease, and who is unable to find work. Fugard effects a shift in focus in this situation by using Melton to evoke a latent (if reluctant) humanitarianism in Daan, who is forcibly faced with the misery of another and has to relinquish his carefully treasured job to help. The growing insistence on caring is evident in this emphasis in the play. Daan's naïve selfishness is utterly human, appalling, endearing and thus wholly convincing. The fact that the playwright should have chosen to dwell on Daan to cast light on Melton and his plight (as representative of a whole segment of the population) is significant: in a sense this is structurally repeated in the situation between Elsa and the Black Woman in *The Road to Mecca*.

Master Harold and the Boys (described by Walder as continuing the "didactic naturalism" of *Aloes* and *Marigolds*) is a painfully acute autobiographical play, arousing in spectators a "painful, shared awareness of the personal roots of racialism, of the secret ugliness we all harbour within ourselves in our most intimate relationships ... the exorcism of Fugard's private guilt has provided an opportunity for the exorcism of a public guilt" (Walder, 1984:120). The play has been enormously successful at the popular level, and because the "gut response is so considerable, it is difficult to assess objectively. One has to go along to a large extent with Walder's statement that "our response is further complicated by Fugard's recent homiletic urge, apparent once again the somewhat heavy-handed explication of 'lessons' " (p. 121). There is a didactic element in the play that is intrusive, more so in reading than in viewing the play (in my personal experience).

The main character in the play, Master Harold, or Hally, is graphically suggested to be Fugard himself at the age of seventeen, and is brought into the play in a way to suggest further self-castigation resulting in a catharsis at once private and public. He is depicted at the age of seventeen, involved in life and arrogantly full of facile, quasi-philosophical "solutions" yet painfully vulnerable. Sam and Willy, two Blacks, work in his mother's small café/restaurant, and have done so for years. Because Hally's father is a cripple and an alcoholic and totally inadequate in his role as father, Hally turns to Sam for guidance and for the warmth of a truly fulfilling relationship. The relationship between the two is rendered without sentimentality and with complete conviction. There seems to be complete trust between them, and Hally's youthful brashness is often tempered by Sam's gentle maturity and understanding (Sam's saintliness, which is at times laid on just thick enough to suggest that he is expressing the "author's message" is sorely tried in the course of the play, and this makes him more human and acceptable).

A central motif in the play is the concept of the dream. Man needs a dream to keep him fully alive and to allow him to keep going in the face of invidious social conditions. In this play Fugard's insistence on common human dignity is also explicitly expressed. The pervasive back-

ground to the play is still the sociopolitical situation in South Africa, and while it never intrudes one is insistently aware of it, but as in *Aloes* the stridently accusing tone of the earlier political plays has made way for a weary sadness, which is quietly persuasive. This is obviously more so to a South African reader, for Walder finds that at the centre of the play there is a condoning of the racial insult and humiliation (p. 125), and he concludes that this is because Fugard sees things from the white liberal point of view, and is unable to avoid that — this is “a long way from the achievement of the *Statements* plays” (p. 126).

The achievement of this play is different, however. There is some further movement in the direction of finding the significance of human relationships in bonds of friendship rather than in family (harshly suggested in Hally's ambivalent attitude to his father and his adoption of Sam as a surrogate), and Fugard integrates his symbolic concerns more fully. The dream is exemplified both in the soaring visual image of the kite (mired in the ironical fact of the Whites Only bench which effectively excludes Sam from full participation in the outing which is intended as a healing pilgrimage for Hally's hurt) and in the idea of the dance as a paradigm of universal harmony. Although a little laboured at times, this paradigm is worked out persuasively, and it is poignant that Sam should ameliorate his suffering under the strictures of one system (the sociopolitical one) by escaping into the ordered precision of the dance: the abstract intricacy of steps is contrasted tellingly to the impartially and disinterestedly cruel imposition of “order” and “control”.

The central issue of trust and betrayal (worked out with painstaking thoroughness in true confessional fashion) culminates in an open ending. The play gains an added thrust and poignancy by means of the overtly autobiographical and thus searingly confessional slant. Sam is also a worthy addition to the gallery of human portraits of dignity, joining Piet and Paulus.

The kind of “brotherhood” (biological) in a play like *The Blood Knot* has in this play become a more universal brotherhood (an idea gradually developing and becoming more insistent in the course of the later plays),

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not yet really workable perhaps when the chips are down, but instinct with possibility (structurally suggested by the open ending).

This idea is developed most persuasively in *The Road to Mecca*, first published in 1985. For the first time, a Fugard play features more than one central female character, Miss Helen of the small Karoo village of New Bethesda, and Elsa, the liberal humanist from the Cape. As always, Fugard's stage is sparsely populated, so that the impact of the crises in the lives of the characters contracts to become a small pin-point of white-hot incandescence.

Miss Helen, the central figure in this play about a personal search for meaning and validity, has in her old age and widowhood turned to making sculptures out of cement. There are all sorts of weird and wonderful animal images, all pointing resolutely in the direction of Mecca, representative of the idea of a deeply personal and imaginative redemption, as opposed to the stunted and stultifying possibilities of conventional Calvinism: "The only reason I've got for being alive is my Mecca. Without that I'm ... nothing ... a useless old woman getting on everybody's nerves ... " (p. 35). In her clinging to her personal symbol of redemption she is reminiscent of Piet in *A/oes*, but her symbolic involvement carries more overtones of the mystical and the abstract, and fewer of the rootedness within the confines of the particular of Piet.

She is regarded, quite simply and literally, as mad by the straitlaced and dour inhabitants of the village, who cannot, within the framework of their conventional Calvinism (Fugard in an interview referred to the "almost feudal world" she inhabits) apprehend her insistence on a different, highly individualized road to salvation. She is doggedly pursued by the minister, who is, in Elsa's acute observation, desperately if numbly in love with her. He lacks the power of imagination, however, to reach out to her, and in his simple and devout but stultifying "goodness" he comes appallingly close to smothering what small flame she resolutely keeps burning. Her one friend and soulmate is Elsa, the liberal schoolteacher from the Cape, who has a strong and burning sense of outrage at the sociopolitical situation in the country, and who voices

it in her ambivalent response to the Black woman with the child on her back to whom she offers a lift on her way to visiting Helen. She is appalled because the woman has an incredible distance to walk, and will probably sleep in a storm-water drain (doing all these things with a kind of stoical paralyses of emotion that Elsa cannot penetrate and which drives her almost insane with frustration). At the level of conscience this intensifies her rebelliousness (she is to be reprimanded by the Education Department for her "liberal views and incitement" of the school-children), but at the personal level it underscores her own loss (the painful breakup with a married lover and the inevitable subsequent abortion - and her realization that killing the unborn child was a matter of terminating "the first real consequence my life has ever had" (p. 76). The visit, which is the occasion of the play, culminates in a crisis as both women turn their lives inside out in the process of experiencing shattering personal reassessments, but they emerge triumphant if battered at the end, with trust reaffirmed between them and the friendship strengthened in all its fulfilling beauty. It seems as if the paradigm discernible in *Aloes of hope deferred — hopefulness — hopelessness* gains the fourth element in the play of *hope recaptured in (personal) faith and trust*. The play ends with the now-familiar ironic references to conventional religiosity, and its inability to cope with real human needs. When Elsa asks Helen why she has not made an angel, Helen responds that the cemetery is full of angels, all wings and haloes, but no glitter. Her option of a highly individualized solution, symbolized by the statues pointing to Mecca, is therefore to be preferred. Her rejection of conventional modes of thought is also echoed at a further level. Keeping in mind the extra-textual information provided by Fugard himself (however suspect that might also be as a technique of literary criticism) that the "model" for Miss Helen committed suicide, and that Elsa intuitively suspects Miss Helen when she hears of the accident with the lamp, and the fire during which Helen seemed paralysed and unable to escape, there seems to be an existentialist dimension to Miss Helen's plan for coping with the world. This interpretation, which to my mind explains something of the ambivalence one senses in reading the play, is rendered feasibly by the knowledge of Fugard's lifelong interest in and adherence to Camus (see Walder, 1984:21, for a more complete expli-

tion of Fugard's philosophical antecedents).

Thus, in conclusion, one can posit that there has indeed been a shift in the later plays. The symbolic content has been consciously strengthened if at times in a somewhat laboured fashion. The centre of interest has shifted towards a stronger insistence on personal relationships (not blood-relationship) and the question of trust and love. The paradigm suggested in embryo in *Aloes* has moved towards completion in *The Road to Mecca* at the abstract symbolic level — that salvation in this situation and in this country is to be found, if at all, at the abstract highly individualized, symbolic level.

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- (Dates in brackets indicate dates of first performances.)