

Athol Fugard

Breaking Bad Karma in South Africa

The name Athol Fugard has come to represent for the world the conscience of South Africa. Over the past three decades his country's system of apartheid has informed and galvanized his writing. Exploring the lives of blacks and whites, and the mixed race — "colored" of South Africa, Fugard's plays depict racial segregation's dehumanizing effects on every level of his society. Over two long-distance telephone interviews, one in April and the other in June, the playwright talks to me about *Playland*, his new work which receives its American premiere at San Diego's La Jolla Playhouse this month.

"You are having a peep into my womb!" These are Fugard's first words when I call him at his home in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in April this year. Not exactly what I was expecting from this man who many believe is a potential Nobel Prize laureate. He chuckles at his colorful metaphor and explains that our first interview is like a sonogram because *Playland* is not yet completed. Not yet quite sure of what he will deliver, the expectant playwright says that, without specifically intending to, he is writing a

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play that is a metaphor for the situation in South Africa at the moment. "And if I haven't lost touch with my craft," he adds, "maybe a metaphor for any situation in which people are separated by,



KEN HOWARD

After having given it life, the playwright is now shepherding his creation through its first production, directing it as he has done most of his plays. He will direct *Playland* in America as well. "I'm feeling very positive because I have the security of believing that I actually wrote the play that I wanted to write," he reports.

Like most of his work, *Playland* started off with an image. "I've had an appointment with some of the central images for a long time," Fugard says, "and that usually bodes well for me as a writer." Twenty years ago while he was driving through the Karoo, the desert region where Fugard was born, he passed a run-down, traveling carnival, or playland as it is known in local parlance. "It struck me as being very sad and pathetic, like many aspects of South Africa," he recalls. "The image stayed with me, and, over the years, I thought it was a great setting for a play because, in South Africa, we have tried

and have to confront each other across the gap of violence."

At the time of our second conversation, two months later, Fugard is in a hotel room in Johannesburg. He celebrated his sixtieth birthday a few days before. Both the new born play and father are doing just fine. *Playland* is in rehearsal for a July premiere at the Market Theater.

to escape our problems and our dilemmas for so long. Instead of facing them we buy tickets for the ferris wheel."

Many years later, he saw a photograph in the local paper which depicted a scene of carnage from the border war South Africa fought in Angola to keep Namibia a part of South Africa. It was a "very ugly, very moving" photo of violence and

Above: Maria Tucci and Athol Fugard in a scene from Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* in the La Jolla Playhouse production of 1991.

by Gerard Raymond


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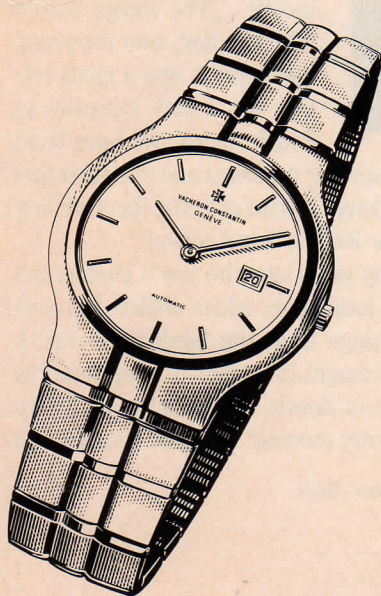
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he clipped it out because he realized that the appointment to write *Playland* was coming up soon. A year later he *began work on the play*.

Thirty years ago, when the South African government began their harshest crackdown on the anti-apartheid movement with the notorious Sharpeville massacre of 1960, Fugard was in London trying to establish a theater career. He promptly bought one-way tickets for his wife and himself and returned to South Africa. Since then he has chosen to stay there, in spite of harassment from the authorities — his passport was withdrawn

in stark contrast, his second house is situated in the hard, dry Karoo desert. Writing for him is a physical and sensual act, which he does by hand using a new fountain pen for each play. thirty-five years of writing by hand however, have taken their toll, and he now suffers from osteoarthritis in his right hand, a chronic degenerative order with which he has to live painfully.

Playland is a two-character play, like his first major work, *The Blood Knot*. Fugard is fascinated by the “dynamic of a binary relationship.” With *The Blood Knot*, a story of two “Colored” brothers



Athol Fugard, Bennet Guillloy, and Maria Tucci in Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* — the La Jolla Playhouse's 1991 production.

in 1967 and he wasn't allowed to travel out of the country for four years. He is unable to write on foreign soil, and it is only in South Africa that he can work constructively against the system. He once put it this way: “Like Tchaikovsky, I find that I cry very easily when I'm *not* on my native soil. I do very little crying back there. It's an emotional bind to my country and its people which is without logic.”

When writing, Fugard divides his time between his two homes: A house called The Ashram in Port Elizabeth is lush and green and located by the Indian Ocean;

which opened in Johannesburg in 1961, he says he found the kind of form, and the style, that suited him best. “I don't think I would be able to handle a canvas any bigger than that.” Since then he has largely restricted himself to writing about no more than three characters at a time.

I point out to Fugard that the three characters of his small canvas plays may be of much greater significance than they seem. Under South African law just three people are enough to constitute a “social gathering.” “That never struck me, but it makes me smile,” he says. One of the

seeds of his 1978 play, *A Lesson from Aloes*, was an incident where a colored man, who was considered politically undesirable by the Ministry of Justice and forbidden to meet more than one person at a time, attended a party. It was not uncommon for the South African police to burst into a home where a man was sitting down with his wife and child and make an arrest claiming that it was a "social gathering."

Playland's two characters are total strangers to each other, a black man and a white man. The white man, Vincent Le Roux, is a drifter, and Martinus Zoeloe,

either of them can live peacefully with themselves in the future.

Our second conversation takes place just a few days after the massacre at Boipatong township, where thirty-nine black men, women and children were savagely murdered; Nelson Mandela has broken off negotiations with the South African government. Fugard deplores the new spate of violence which is interfering with talks aimed at dismantling apartheid and peacefully ushering in black majority rule. "The degree of violence, white against black and black against black almost puts the apartheid years to shame," Fugard

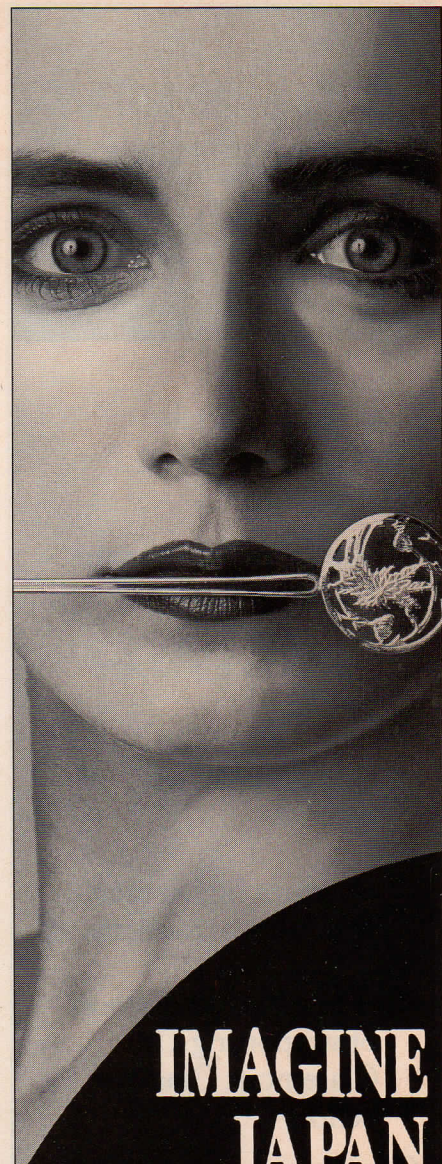


Sterling Macer, Brock Peters, and Nancy Travis in Athol Fugard's My Children! My Africa! — the La Jolla Playhouse's 1990 production.

loe, the black man, is the caretaker of the amusement park of the title. Both men have violent histories. Le Roux fought in the Angolan border war. He has killed hundreds of black men during the war. He is also guilty of committing the casual violence that is so commonly inflicted on black women in the country, where rape is often the rite of passage for young white males. On his part, Zoeloe has the murder of a white man on his conscience. Together the two men realize that they must confront and acknowledge their violent pasts before

reports. "There is no excuse for violence, whoever is responsible."

The key to *Playland* is a phrase Fugard scribbled down before he started writing the play: *The mystery of repentance in the human heart*. Fugard says those words, which he fastened above his writing desk, were a compass bearing which kept him focused. I ask Fugard to explain the phrase. "In order to achieve a decent society there has got to be some acknowledgement of responsibility for what has happened in the past," he elaborates. "Until there is accountabil-



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Brock Peters and Nancy Travis in a scene from My Children! My Africa!

ity, and stemming from that, a genuine request for forgiveness, I don't hold out much hope for a peaceful society. I think that is the only way to break the karma of violence in this country."

A spirituality permeates *Playland* and it has an almost religious fervor, that is new in Fugard's writing. The black character, Zoeloe, is a Christian with a born-again passion, and constantly talks of a Day of Judgment and transgressions against "Number Six," the Thou shalt not Kill-commandment. But despite his Christian faith, he finds it difficult to repent for his murder and cannot forgive the history of violence against blacks.

But Fugard says he is no longer a Christian. When I ask him about his phrase "the karma of violence," he talks about his interest in Buddhism. "I am reluctant to flatter myself by calling myself a Buddhist, it might be presumptuous," he says. "But I have a reverence for life and a very real connection in my life to Buddhism at the moment."

While Fugard's previous plays tend to be either introspective, like *The Road to Mecca* in 1984, or overtly political, like *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972) and *The Island* (1973), *Playland* is a little of both. "I think I have struck a happy balance between the two aspects of my nature," says the playwright. "Life is a tightrope walk between two Fugards. Often the introspective Athol Fugard wants to tell stories, but the socially committed Athol Fugard is impatient about the realities of his country and wins the days." Yet even when apartheid is one day completely dismantled, it is hard to imagine that the political Athol Fugard will disappear. "I tell stories about desperate people, and there will be plenty of desperate people left in the country," he adds regretfully.

Fugard says he began directing his own plays because he felt he would be able to serve the text better than another director. One generally associates simple, almost bare, stage settings with Fugard's plays. The text is what counts. The first

productions of a new play are "the most vulnerable moment" in the play's life, he asserts. Yet he also acknowledges the "collaborative nature" of the theater, and says his productions are a product Fugard the director working as a team with the designers to give Fugard, the playwright's, work its best shot. But this time, he laughs, design-wise, *Playland* is "showiest" work to date. The amusement park setting calls for montages of sound and light which simulate the playland's side-shows and rides. "In nothing I have written before have I invited production values to the extent this one does."

We are nearing the end of our second long-distance conversation. *Playland* is two weeks into rehearsal and Fugard and his cast are discovering lessons of his new born play. What could it say to a post-apartheid South Africa, which seems closer than ever before? For one thing,

"In order to achieve a decent society there has got to be some acknowledgement of responsibility for what has happened in the past."

violence and wrongdoing on both sides must be acknowledged. Fugard tells me that the white actor who is playing Vincent Le Roux in Johannesburg observed that the play is like an exorcism. The player suggested that Fugard is asking the white character to act as an agent for the audience, to provide white South Africa with a catharsis in terms of its accumulated guilt.

"And he is absolutely right," Fugard exclaims. "I cannot say that my liberal convictions or my actions leave me completely innocent. I was a recipient of the benefits that came from apartheid simply by virtue of my white skin. And one way or another I have got to acknowledge a certain responsibility. That is what the white character does for even the most liberal South Africans. He is up there acknowledging guilt, arriving at a point of repentance and asking for forgiveness for all of us." □

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