

Karma of Violence

Athol Fugard on *Playland*, the new South Africa, and the process of writing.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Even in these cynical times, Athol Fugard gives the words "liberal" and "humane" a good name. No wonder he's been called the conscience of South Africa. For the past three decades, the playwright has, with compassion and fierce dedication, explored the dehumanizing effects of his country's system of racial segregation on South African society among whites, blacks, and the mixed race of "coloreds."

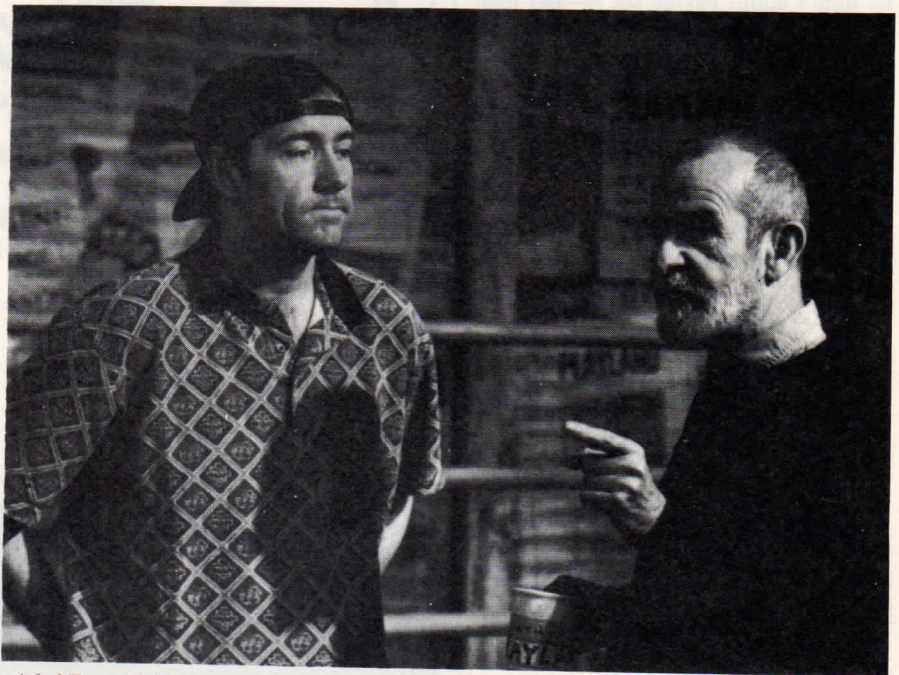
A writer, director, and actor, Fugard is no stranger to American audiences. His plays—*Blood Knot*, 'Master Harold' . . . and the boys, *The Road to Mecca*, and *My Children! My Africa!*, to name a few—have been successes both on and off Broadway. And he has been extensively produced in regional theaters around the country as well. Fugard's latest work, *Playland*, reveals the playwright at his best. Infused with characteristic humanity, it embodies a lesson for his country as well as for a world ridden with violence and strife.

I talked to Fugard about *Playland* three times over the course of a year. Two of these conversations were by phone when he was completing the play and getting it ready for the South African premiere. We subsequently met in New York last month where he was staging *Playland* at the Manhattan Theater Club. Neither sanctimonious nor self-important, this man, often mentioned as a potential Nobel Prize candidate, is warm, courteous, unassuming, and full of good humor—in every sense a true gentleman.

March 13, 1992: Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Gerard Raymond: I'm calling to talk about your new play.

Athol Fugard: You are having a peep



Athol Fugard (right) works with Kevin Spacey during *Playland* rehearsals. Gerry Goldstein

into my womb. [He chuckles.] You know how some women nowadays do these gynecological scans so they actually look at their child even before the baby is born. I think that's what we are doing. . . .

What does it look like?

I call it *Playland*. Like so many of my plays, it reflects my fascination with the dynamic of a binary relationship. In other words, there are two characters in it, and I once again explore the relationship between two human beings—two strangers—a black man and a white man.

What is *Playland* about?

All through the writing of this play, I have always had in front of me, on my desk, a little note I scribbled: the mystery of repentance in the human heart. That's been like a compass bearing for me, helping me to stay focused on what I think the play is really about. In a sense, it's what lies at the heart of this play and in the experience between these two men. Both

men have very violent personal histories, and in the course of the evening, they confront each other, themselves, and their pasts.

Did you write the play to address something relevant to South Africa today?

I never set out to write an idea or a metaphor, but now that the play is almost written, I realize that the two men are a kind of a metaphor for the situation in my country at this particular moment in time. And maybe if I am a good enough playwright, and if I haven't lost touch with my craft, maybe it's a metaphor for any situation in which people have to confront each other and themselves across the gap of violence.

But this play isn't something that I have cooked up overnight in order to deal with a pressing issue facing us in this country. I've had an appointment with some of the central images in the play for a long, long

time. That is always a good sign for me as a writer. If some of the elements have a gestatory period in my subconscious, as it were, that usually bodes well for the future, let me put it that way.

So you start with an image?

The oldest image in the play is very neutral, but it is the image of the title. Here in South Africa, "playland" means an amusement park or funfair with side-shows and rides: a Ferris wheel, scenic railway, and figure of eight.

About 20 years ago, I was driving through the Karoo, a very desolate part of the country near where I was born. On the outskirts of a little town, I passed a very sad, run-down, little traveling playland that had set itself there for a couple of nights. This little amusement park... it just struck me as being very sad and pathetic. The image stayed with me and provoked me. Over the years, I have kept thinking to myself, what a great setting for a play, a great metaphor for South Africa. Because this is a country where, for so long, we tried to escape from our problems and our dilemmas. Instead of facing them, we buy tickets for the Ferris wheel.

Over the years, other images have joined it. Three years ago, I saw a photo in the Port Elizabeth newspaper—a very ugly, very moving photo of a moment of violence in the border war that South Africa fought in Angola to keep Namibia. That galvanized my thinking, and suddenly I realized that I had an appointment to write a play coming up very soon. I cut out that photo, and about a year later, I realized the time had come and I got on with it.

I understand you like to write in long-hand.

Yes, my favorite pen is out on the table as I work my way through this play. I must admit it is a little bit difficult now, because I have osteo-arthritis in my right hand and I sometimes have quite a bit of pain. It's a degenerative disorder which comes from holding a pen and writing with a clenched hand for 35 years. Doctors say there is basically nothing you can do about it. You can kill the pain, but there is no cure. I hope it doesn't mean that one day I am going to have to settle for a typewriter.

Do you write only when you are home in South Africa?

Yes, I have two homes in South Africa. One is the "Ashram" in Port Elizabeth, and the other is in a little village in the Karoo, the same little village that's in *The*

"Where the chef cooks like mom, and the dining room feels like a den."
—New York Times

Sami's
263

SERVING BROADWAY'S FAVORITE DISH... CASUAL, FUN, DELICIOUS.

LUNCH • DINNER • LATE SUPPER
Complete Dinner Special \$16.95 5-7pm & 8-10pm
SUNDAY BRUNCH

AMERICAN/ITALIAN CUISINE

263 WEST 45th STREET
between Broadway & 8th Ave.

STEPS FROM
LES AMIZ, PHANTOM,
WILL ROGERS FOLLIES...

212-719-5416
OPEN 7 DAYS

LAURIE!
PURE GLORY!

"...a voice made to tear into big ballads."
—New York Times

Two shows nightly! Tues. Sat.

RAINBOW STARS

JUNE 8 THRU JULY 3

"A knockout!" —Time Magazine

Accepting only one card. The American Express Card

(212) 632-5000
65th Fl
30 Rockefeller Plaza

Laurie Beechman
MUSICAL DIRECTOR: BRUCE W. COYLE

★★★ AND ★★★

RAINBOW PROMENADE

New York's greatest bar
with New York's greatest views!

Starring Revival Cocktails and Little Meals.

For reservations call (212) 632-5000

RAINBOW!

65th Floor 30 Rockefeller Plaza

AMERICAN EXPRESS
Cards Accepting only one card...The American Express® Card

Pomairé

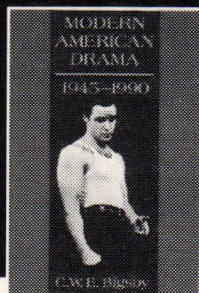
FINE
CHILEAN
CUISINE

371 W. 46th St.
on Restaurant Row
212 956-3055

Lunch Specials Mon-Fri \$6.95
Dinner Specials Every day \$12.95
Live Music Romantic classical guitar every night
OPEN 7 DAYS

Try the delightful cuisine of Pomairé — Your chance to visit ancient Chile, without leaving New York.

High Performance from CAMBRIDGE



Modern American Drama, 1945-1990

C.W.E. Bigsby

"A work of enormous encyclopedic breadth..."

—Arthur Miller

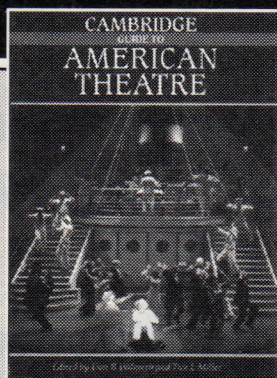
371 pp.
41649-3 Hc \$59.95
42667-7 Pb \$17.95

The American Stage

Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present

Ron Engle
and Tice L. Miller, Editors

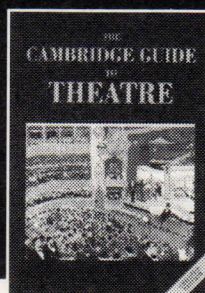
The first book to focus on the economic and social forces that shaped American theater, including theater's response to slavery and women's rights, theater nostalgia during the Reagan era, and issues of multiculturalism in today's theater.
320 pp. 41238-2 Hardcover \$49.95



Cambridge Guide to American Theatre

Don B. Wilmet
and Tice L. Miller, Editors

This comprehensive guide boasts 2,300 entries—alphabetically arranged—on people, plays, mainstream and alternative theater, regional theater, dramatic theory, and more.
172 halftones 555 pp.
40134-8 Hardcover \$49.95



The Cambridge Guide to Theatre

Martin Banham, Editor

"A gem of a reference tool; it is hard to imagine anyone in the theatre who would not benefit from owning a personal copy."

—Theatre Studies

270 halftones 1104 pp.
26595-9 Hardcover \$69.95
Paperback (Updated Edition)
42903-X \$24.95

A History of the Theatre

Second Edition

Glynne Wickham

"A panoramic study of the development of drama over the past 3,000 years. Its literate style and erudite perceptiveness illuminate this detailed saga of the earliest form of popular spectacle." —Backstage
16 color plates 220 halftones
287 pp. 43733-4 Paperback \$29.95

Available in bookstores or from

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211
Call toll-free 800-872-7423. MasterCard/VISA accepted.

Road to Mecca. I alternate between the Ashram, which is near the sea and is a very green, lush world, and the Karoo, which is a hard, dry, challenging, desert world. I have been writing *Playland* between the two.

Once again, you've written a play with just two characters. Is this a specific choice on your part?

It is definitely a preference. I find I want to explore a binary, or at the most, a triangular relationship. I don't think I would be able to handle a canvas any bigger than that. I wrote two apprenticeship plays with large casts. But with *Blood Knot*, in 1961 [about two "colored" brothers], I think I found the canvas which suits me best, and here I am doing it again.

You tend to direct your own plays...

Simply because the first productions of a new play are the most vulnerable moments in the play's life. You have really got to do everything you can to make sure that the story the author tried to tell is the story on stage. I know I have enough craft as a director to look after a play. I make certain that actors, designers, and myself as director serve the text Athol Fugard the playwright has written.

Do you expect to make changes in your text when you start rehearsing the play?

When I go into a rehearsal with a new play, I take with me what I call a working draft, and I am quite prepared to discover in the course of the first production that I need to do a little work on the play '*Master Harold*'... and the boys and *Boesman and Lena* virtually underwent no change in the rehearsal room. But in a play like *A Lesson from Aloes*, it changed from the first production in America and my work with James Earl Jones on that script. Thanks to him, that's the version that is now published. But I do not subscribe to the American school of "let's-fix-it" theater. I do my job at my desk, and when I leave that desk, I have written a play.

June 21, 1992: Johannesburg, South Africa

Fugard has celebrated his 60th birthday ten days earlier. *Playland* will premiere at Johannesburg's Market Theater with John Kani as Martinus Zoeloe, the black man, and Sean Taylor as the white man, Gideon Le Roux.

Well, how is everything going?

We have been in the rehearsal room for two weeks now, and it is going very well.

There have been no major changes, and I have the security of believing that I actually wrote the play I wanted to write. Whether people are going to find it interesting or meaningful or entertaining, that's another question. But I do know that the play I wanted is down on paper, so I am feeling very positive.

Reading the script, it appears *Playland* is both introspective like *The Road to Mecca* and political like *My Children! My Africa!*

I am very aware of that. I think I have struck a very happy balance in this play between two aspects of my nature. One is obviously Athol Fugard the socially committed artist, and the other one is the introspective Fugard. That's why a play like *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* [1972] was followed by a play like *The Island* [1973]. The two sides of my nature are quite often at war with each other, and life is a constant tight-rope act between these two Fugards.

It looks now as if apartheid may finally be ended. How has that informed *Playland*?

There is talk about the New South Africa. *Playland* does address one of the challenges which we as South Africans face. There is a degree of violence between white and black, black and black, that almost puts the apartheid years to shame. The massacre of 39 people [at Boipatong township] two nights ago epitomizes the atmosphere and the degree of violence which is rampant in this country at the moment. Any sensible and serious person in South Africa knows that this violence is one of the major stumbling blocks in the negotiation process to the evolution of a decent, democratic society.

There has got to be some accountability for what has happened in the past. I think that the only way to break the karma of violence in this country is to acknowledge responsibility and ask for forgiveness.

"The karma of violence..."

Yes, that is a phrase which characterizes South Africa. I have a reverence for life, which comes to me from my interest in Buddhism. I suppose that can't help showing itself in the writing. In terms of my play, the religion is obviously Christianity, which was the religion of my youth, but it's not the one that I practice now.

Are you a Buddhist now?

It might be presumptuous to call myself that. I think I need to develop my practice and my meditation much more strongly

DaRosina

Ristorante Italiano

Fine Italian Cuisine on Restaurant Row

Moderately Priced, Perfect Before or After Theater

Homemade Pasta Our Specialty

Lunch, Dinner, Cocktails, Open 7 Days

342 W. 46th St. (bet. 8th & 9th Aves., NYC) Tel.: (212) 977-7373

THEATRE ON A LIMB
Cara Lea, Artistic Director
PRESENTS

THE DRESSER, THE DUCK, THE DEITY & THE DRUM MAJOR

BY AWARD-WINNING PLAYWRIGHT
ALAN DAVID PERKINS

DIRECTED BY
CARA LEA

June 4, 5, 11, 12, 18, 19, 25 & 26 - 8:00 pm
The Mazur Theatre at the Asphalt Green, 555 East 90th Street at FDR Drive
All seats \$12.00. For reservations call (718) 575-0251



FREE BOTTLE OF WINE
(JUST MENTION THIS AD WHEN YOU ORDER)



312 West 57th Street 212-489-9767
BETWEEN 8th & 9th AVENUES

The Finest in Contemporary American Cuisine

Daily Specials - Saturday and Sunday Brunch with Live Piano Music

All Major Credit Cards Accepted

Convenient to Carnegie Hall and All Broadway Theaters

**When You Have
GROUPS OR INDIVIDUAL V.I.P. VISITORS
Coming to New York City--
call**



V.I.P. TOURS OF NEW YORK

*Distinctive, Unforgettable Tours
of New York Life, Architecture and Theatre*

*Tailored to the Very Special Visitor
by New York's foremost
Architectural and Theatre Expert*

**455 W 43rd St., #3a
NY, NY 10036**

**Phone: 212-247-0366
Fax: 212-397-0851**

PLAYWRIGHTS!

Seeking Scripts.

Cabal Theatre Company seeks original one-act plays for N.Y. production.
Cast size 2-6, between 17-35 years of age. Deadline July 8th.

**Send scripts to Cabal Theatre Company,
205 Allen St. #26 NY, NY 10002**

**FOR A MESSENGER OR TRUCK
IN AN
INSTANT**

ACT

FAST!

DIAL

M-O-B-I-L-E-1

**662-4531 MOBILE PARCEL
CARRIERS**

than it is at the moment before I can confront this world and say, I am a Buddhist. But it is a very real presence in my life at the moment, a very real connection.

Could you elaborate on *Playland's* theme of repentance and forgiveness?

Two weeks ago, Sean Taylor, the white actor, made the observation that this play is an exorcism. He said I was asking the white character to, in a sense, 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. Although I have tried in whatever way I could to fight apartheid over all these years, I must nevertheless acknowledge that I carry a responsibility for those terrible years as well. I can't say that my liberal convictions and my actions leave me completely innocent. To the extent that I lived in this country, I was a recipient of benefits and privileges that came to me simply by virtue of my white skin. That is what that white character does for even the most liberal of white South Africans. He is up there acknowledging guilt, arriving at a point of repentance and asking forgiveness for all of us.

May 25, 1993: New York

Fugard and I finally meet at Manhattan Theater Club's Stage II, where Playland has just begun previews. In the year since the premiere in Johannesburg, Playland has been produced at the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, the Donmar Warehouse in London and at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta.

Has the play changed over the past four productions?

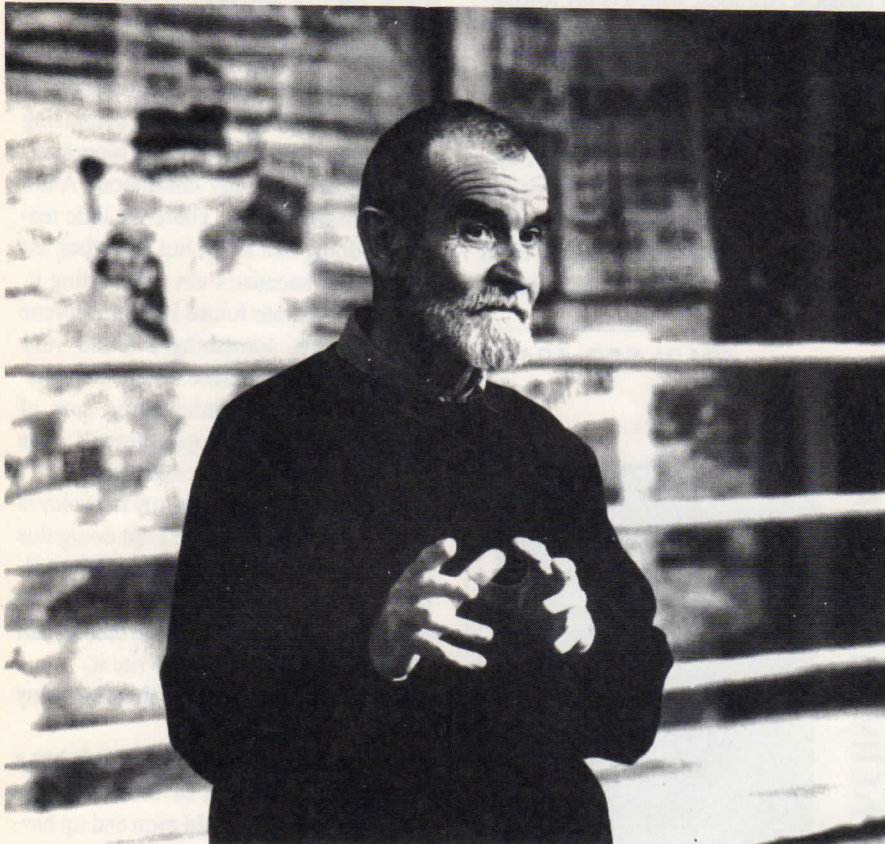
Things vary, because you are dealing with different actors, because of chemistry. The two South African actors who did it with me in Johannesburg, and whom I also took to London, obviously brought with them certain qualities, like authenticity, that are pretty hard for any foreign actors to equal. I am not saying that it makes them better actors, but it was their own story, a story of their country, and they had made a personal investment in this play. The two marvelous actors at La Jolla [Larry Golden and Ben Halley, Jr.] found insights into the play which the South African actors hadn't discovered, which I was able to give to the South African actors when we did it in London.

Now, here I am with these two extraordinary actors [Kevin Spacey and

Frankie Faison], and they have made it a story about all people. I must tell you very, very candidly that I think Kevin and Frankie have given me, if not the best, then certainly one of the best experiences I have ever had with American actors. They have been just extraordinary in their openness, their preparedness to take direction, their courage. Kevin's per-

ences reacted differently to *Playland*?

No, that is, of course, allowing for national character. English audiences are always a little bit more reserved in their response than American audiences. But the American productions have an advantage. Here at the Manhattan Theater Club, and to a certain extent in the previous productions in America, the fact that two



Fugard at work. *Gerry Goldstein*

formance requires that he goes right to the edge and then over—that takes courage. Those qualities have made this production, for me, quite memorable and helped me overcome that certain inertia that I started with, because it was my fifth production of the play. Working with these two chaps completely refreshed me and gave me a new slant on the play. They discovered things for themselves that none of the previous four productions had done.

What sort of slant?

For example, Kevin—this is the way I have been reading his performance—is more vulnerable than the other Gideons were. I think Frankie, until the moment when he is under the pressure of the situation and starts to tell his story, has made Martinus more secretive, and that's to the benefit of the play. I think the new slant starts with that.

Have British and American audi-

Americans have processed the text and come up with a humor that Americans understand, has helped this production enormously. Humor is a very parochial thing. It is not always easy for one country to appreciate the humor of another—a German joke never makes the French people laugh. To that extent, the little bit of humor that there is in the play eluded the British audiences. I think that if I had put the South African actors down here, audiences in the Manhattan Theater Club would have to work as hard getting into the play as the London audiences did, simply because they are dealing with the textures and the speech rhythms and everything of another country, even though it is in English.

Are you concerned about getting authentic accents and speech rhythms?

I don't worry about it too much, because I find that it interferes with the ac-

OUR 24TH YEAR!



Student Study Tours

THE OLDEST ... THE BEST!

Career exploration in theater, art, broadcasting, dance

- ✓ Learn from the stars themselves
- ✓ Behind-the-scenes seminars
- ✓ Direct student interaction with professionals
- ✓ Custom-designed programs

Call for details about our exciting New York, London, & Russian Theater Programs.

THE FIELD STUDIES CENTER
OF *New York*

228 West 47th Street, New York, NY 10036
(212) 575-8065 (800) 445-7074

Broadway Beat!

Manhattan Cable Television

Tuesday, 2:30 p.m., Channel 16
Thursday, 12:30 a.m., Channel 16

Paragon Cable Television

Sunday, 11:30 p.m., Channel 17

Applause Video Productions
P.O. Box 261
Times Square Station
New York, NY 10036
(212)-517-1763

tors' process, quite frankly. I have not had all that satisfactory experience with actors who tried to do the full-fledged South African accent. They usually make me wince. So my very specific instructions to Frankie and Kevin were that we were just going to flavor the text a little bit. We are not going to go for the whole thing, because it also creates another surface, and I don't like these surfaces that hinder or make access to the event difficult.

But this set, with the soil of the desert on the stage, isn't that an attempt to duplicate authentically the land of the Karoo desert?

Oh, yes, my designer Susan Hilferty has worked very hard. She has been with me for some 11 years now and has come to South Africa to work with me on five oc-

casions, so she knows the country very well. These textures are very South African, very authentic.

How do the actors achieve that South African texture?

There is a whole a physical reality, for example, to the body language of a white South African, of a Gideon, particularly when he is with a black man—a whole set of physical attitudes, which is my responsibility as a director to pass on to the actors. Similarly, there is the earthbound, rooted, simple dignity to Martinus that characterizes, as I see it, black South Africa. There is nothing hip about the Martinuses in South Africa—they are of the earth. Most important of all is the psychology. A character like Gideon comes from the psychology of an anxiety-ridden

dominant white minority, and it is very specific.

Are you tired of *Playland* after directing it five times now?

I certainly hope that this production of *Playland*, of which, incidentally, I am intensely proud, is the end of the line. Yes, I am tired. I think I have exhausted my responses to the play now as a director, and I want to get back to my writing. There is new writing waiting.

What's the next project?

When I go back to South Africa, first there is something I have been promising myself for a long time—a little biographical memoir about my childhood, Athol Fugard from six to 16. There is a little reason for doing that story, but I'd rather not go into that because I am still writing it. So my immediate future is a bit of prose for a change, something I found very difficult to start, because I write dialogue. But I've actually found some sort of rhythm, and I am enjoying myself. It is rather a refreshing little exercise.

But I do also know what my next play is going to be. I think, while I am doing this bit of prose writing, I will slowly be collecting together the notes I have for that new play, and some time in the second half of this year, I will start to write it.

Can we get a peek at the new play now?

Let me just see for a moment. It has a cast with a minimum of four, which is quite big for me. It might even end up having five characters. . .

An epic. . .

A cast of thousands, man! A big, Hollywood, Cecil B. De Mille production! [He laughs] Ja, so I know that. I know that it is set in the dining room of a little country hotel, and one of the characters, you are going to have to guess who, is from *My Children! My Africa!* So it is something in the nature of a sequel, though it is not only that. That is something I have never done before. I have never felt the need to take up the history of a character once I have finished a play. But it is always time for something new, you know what I mean?

Will you be doing any acting work as well?

Ah, yes, that is something else I can say about the new play. I think I have written a role for myself. Oh! Oh! Will write a role for myself. That's tempting the gods. I apologize, I apologize, I apologize! I am very superstitious when I write. Keep your fingers crossed!

TW

 "... the smart newsletter... sophisticated, information-packed and to the point." **The New York Times /WQXR Radio**

Subscribe to LONDON THEATRE NEWS, the illustrated monthly newsletter, and enjoy complete coverage of London theatre.

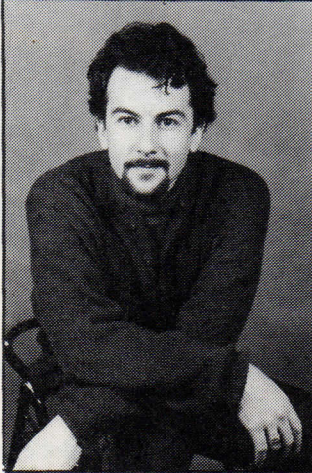
- West End Theatre Listings
- Timely Recommendations
- Opening Night Reviews
- Exclusive Interviews
- Convenient Ticket -Booking Service
- Dining Tips
- and much more!

\$21 for 3 months • \$49 annually

Call toll-free 1-800-779-0077 or send check to:
London Theatre News, Suite 620,
12 East 86th Street, New York, NY 10028

(212) 580-4940

BETH KELLY PHOTOGRAPHY



ACTORS REP COMPANY PRESENTS

CHAMBERS OF THE HEART

Three works by Mark SaFranko
Directed by:
William E. Hunt and Meryl Tanner
Music by John SaFranko
Cast: Valerie Blackmoor, *Teddy Coluca, Tony Lombardi, Ed Mahler, *Tim Miller, Jayne Ross, *Gloria Suave, Austen White
*AEA MEMBERS - AN EQUITY APPROVED SHOWCASE

THE SAMUEL BECKETT THEATER
410 West 42nd St., N.Y.

JUNE 16th thru 27th
Tues. thru Sat. 8PM,
Matinees - Sat. 2pm & Sun. 3 PM

To charge tickets call:
212-279-4200



COLIBRI
BED & BREAKFAST

Calm in the City

Perfect Location

1101 Thurlow
Vancouver Canada,
British Columbia V6E1W9
Tel: (604) 689-5100
Fax: (604) 731-7815