

New York Theater Workshop

How Do You Follow Fugard?

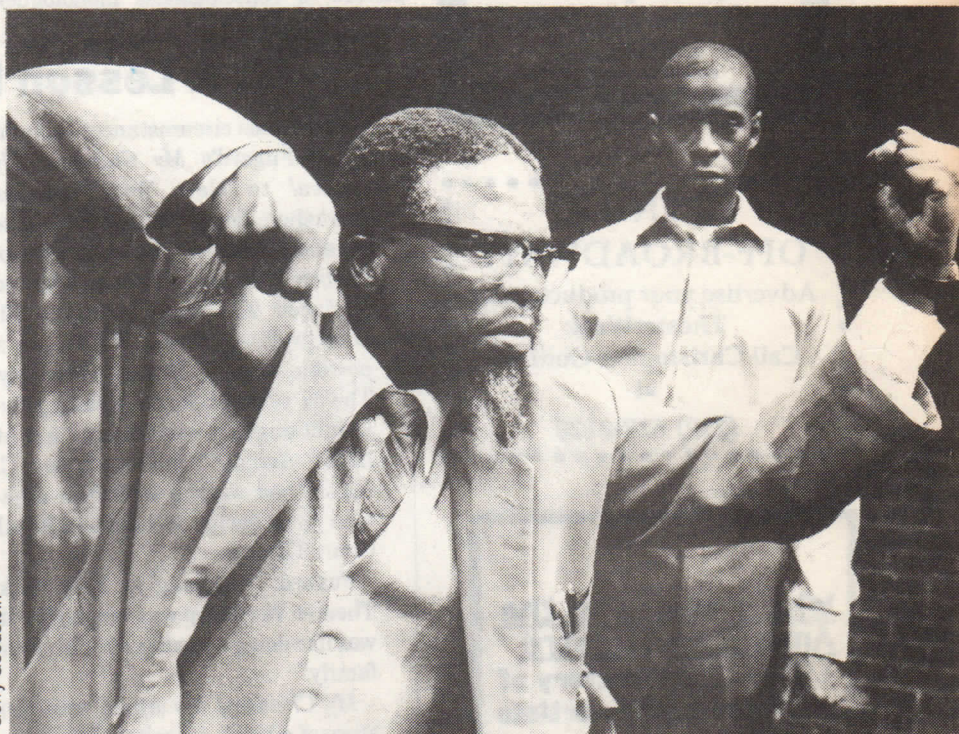
by Ben Pesner and Gerard Raymond

The American premiere of Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!* has put New York Theater Workshop on the map. For almost a decade, NYTW quietly produced what it once called "plays of intelligence and conscience," works like John Guare's *Bosoms and Neglect* and Anne Bogart's *1951*. Its commitment to new plays and new directors caught the attention of theater people—not the public at large. But NYTW's low profile did attract Fugard, who wanted to develop his play in a modest environment. Ironically, his work has substantially raised NYTW's profile and brought the recognition many small off-Broadway theater companies crave. Not to mention some of its pitfalls.

What does a theater dedicated to the development of new artists do after Fugard, whom *Time* magazine called "the greatest living playwright in English?"

"It is very important that emerging artists work in a context of excellence," says artistic director James C. Nicola, during a break in casting for NYTW's next production, *A Forest in Arden*. "It's unfair to expect the next production to live up to inflated expectations raised by *My Children! My Africa!*, which involves artists who are for the most part at the pinnacle of their craft. *A Forest in Arden* will be created by talented and exciting people at the beginnings of their careers."

A new adaptation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* by director Christopher Grabowski, *Arden* is a part of NYTW's New Directors Series. Now in its sixth season, this unique project has offered young directors, like *Mastergate*'s Michael Engler, a first opportunity to direct in a professional off-Broadway setting. [see *TheaterWeek* 3/6/89]



John Kani (l.) and Courtney B. Vance in Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!*

Nicola chooses NYTW's season by relying on his emotional and intellectual responses to a particular director or writer—"a concern with private psychology and behavior that looks at a world around it"—and a desire to explore the multiplicity of theatrical form.

"NYTW gave me the chance to find an audience that would be interested in exploring the same things I was," says Nicola who came to NYTW two years ago after an eight-year stint at Arena Stage in Washington. "Most regional theaters construct huge community audiences which are not frightened of being challenged by a lot of different ideas. But once you get out of a certain understood theatrical form they get lost and very nervous." Nicola left Arena so he could "exercise muscles" he had no op-

portunity to use in that environment.

Nicola's first season ('88-'89) was a mixed bag of theatrical experiences. He brought together Corneille's classical comedy *L'illusion*; David Williamson's slick, contemporary *Emerald City*; *Mercedes*, a baffling, non-linear exercise from West Germany; and Charles L. Mee, Jr.'s stylish, anti-imperialist *The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador*. He also inaugurated *O Solo Mio!*, an annual festival of solo performers which transcends the boundaries of conventional theater.

In contrast to what Nicola describes as the "solid, traditional dramaturgy" of *My Children! My Africa!*, Grabowski's play is an "outrageous desecration of Shake-



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spare where we basically throw *As You Like It* up in the air and put the pieces back together, trying to come up with something different." Using only four actors, Grabowski will wrestle with perceptions of sexuality and race, giving Shakespeare's gender bending tale a new twist.

The company's final, most ambitious project of this season is a music-theater piece based on Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. Nicola calls the novel "an experiment in the narrative form, comprised of stream of consciousness monologues

where characters speak in blocks." Nicola is thrilled that Director Lisa Peterson and composer David Bucknam have turned these monologues into arias. "Taking Woolf's experiment in form one step further to give it theatrical life is a spark of genius," he says.

Nicola's season is a juggling act in which artists at every stage of their career freely explore theatrical form and style. Sometimes it is not easy to categorize such eclecticism. A case in point: Leo Bassi, "Italy's Favorite Terrorist Clown," who headlined the *O Solo Mio!*

A Lesson From Athol

Fortuitous circumstances brought Athol Fugard's *My Children! My Africa!* to New York Theater Workshop for a limited run. The theater's founder and chairman of the board, Stephen Graham, who had produced *The Road to Mecca* off-Broadway, suggested NYTW as a possible venue for Fugard's new play. The 57 year-old South African playwright/director immediately felt at home. Artistic director James C. Nicola had worked with him nineteen years earlier at London's Royal Court Theater.

Fugard: "Working at New York Theater Workshop was wonderful. It was like doing a production with your family."

My Children! My Africa tells the story of a black schoolteacher (John Kani) who brings together two teenagers, one black (Courtney B. Vance) and one white (Lisa Fugard, the playwright's daughter) together for a debating contest. The urgent realities of apartheid put their fragile alliance to the test. In this confrontational play Fugard moves away from the metaphorical writing of plays like *A Lesson From Aloes* and *The Road to Mecca*.

"The play is a very heated emotional debate about issues in South Africa. The high school debate that starts the play demanded a slightly different approach to the question of story-telling. One critic said something about the play being didactic. I don't mind that because everybody in South Africa is in need of a lesson. Let's make no mistake about that."

My Children! My Africa! did not receive the kind of notices which might have extended the life of the production in New York.

"I refuse to let other people's expectations bother me. I will most probably disappoint again and again and again. That is not going to stop me. I'm suffering from a lot of irritation at the moment and a little bit of frustration. My impulse is to say, well damn it all, I will go somewhere where I can be allowed the freedom that an artist wants—to escape the success/failure syndrome of New York theater."

Fugard has directed his plays in New York since the 1975 production of *Sizwie Bansi Is Dead* and *The Island* (co-written with John Kani and Winston Ntshona who won Tony awards for their performances).

"[Over the years] one has seen the cancer of rampant commercialism, the escalation in costs and then ticket prices as a result. That has sapped theater of a lot of vitality. It's certainly not as alive, as vigorous, as bold and as free as it should be. But the remarkable thing is that theater, of course, refuses to die. It will never die in New York.

"It has afforded me great satisfaction that NYTW has picked up a lot of extra subscribers because we have been having such great houses. You see, if only places like NYTW were really looked after, really given freedom and support, then I think theater might stand a chance of resurrecting itself in the city."—Gerard Raymond. □

festival last year. Assaulting NYTW audiences with a carnival of political rhetoric and shaving cream pies, he crowned his act by juggling a piano with his feet. Bassi won an Obie but the *Times* would not review him because his antics did not fit neatly under the usual rubrics: theater or cabaret. "We are in danger of confusing an audience, but I hope they are in a position of expecting anything we put their way and will bring a different set of expectations to each event," Nicola says.

Establishing an identity without a marketable catchphrase is a daunting task. What's more, since 1984 NYTW has made a home at the Perry Street Theater in Greenwich Village, a 95-seat space which other groups also rent when NYTW is not in production. Does an audience identify with a building or an institution? Nicola acknowledges that the outside world does not yet have a clear image of NYTW. "Who are we? What do we do? Who's in our family? What house do we live in and on which street? These are critical questions for us." NYTW's five year plan envisions the company in its own home by 1992.

But no matter where NYTW presents its work, the "who" is almost as important as the "what." "I believe the way an audience knows who you are is that they know who the *people* are. We are nothing more, and nothing less, than the people who work here together." Nicola hopes to establish at NYTW a core of collaborating artists that audiences will come to identify with the company, as they might link Playwrights Horizons with Christopher Durang and Wendy Wasserstein. "The true sense of a place is about the people who are there on some continuing basis." Established artists like Athol Fugard, *Investigation* director David Schweizer are part of NYTW's artistic family. But the host of new directors, designers, composers and writers who attend NYTW's weekly series of readings and symposia also belong. "We will never surrender an interest and a responsibility to nurturing new people."

Two years into the job Nicola is all too aware of how precarious the life of a non-profit theater can be. NYTW depends on ticket sales, individual and corporate

donations, and government support, which has become increasingly uncertain in the wake of the recent controversy surrounding National Endowment for the Arts grantmaking policy. "This theater is a very small speck in a very large ocean and the outside world has an inordinate influence on our destiny. We have to make plans and work towards goals but we also have to be able to respond to opportunities that come our way from out of nowhere."

With NYTW now in the spotlight, Nicola's task is to build an audience for

his theatrical vision while giving that vision a public identity. The current subscriber base of 350 is small enough to allow him to take risks and to construct an audience who will join his family. "I want to have a conversation with the audience. Our season is different things at different moments. Each play, each production, each event makes its own rules. I would like an audience to feel that our body of work will always be unpredictable—with a continuing theatrical exploration of ideas, of our lives and times." □



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