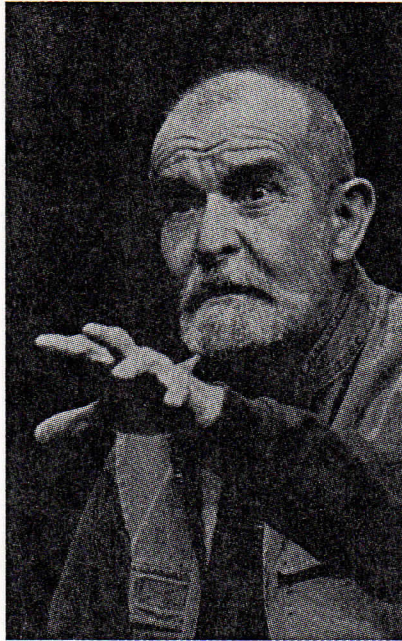


# THEATER

## Interview

### NO TROUBLE ATHOL

Athol Fugard's latest play speaks of a new South Africa



Post-apartheid playwright: Athol Fugard.

I want to make a voyage of exploration and be a Christopher Columbus in my old age!" says Athol Fugard smiling. He looks remarkably like a grizzled sea captain with his piercing dark eyes, silver beard and weather-beaten countenance. But, of course, he is the world-famous playwright from South Africa. And the journey he is talking about, as he chats over coffee in an Upper West Side bistro, is an artistic voyage he must make to keep pace with the momentous changes occurring in his country. A first step in that direction is *Valley Song*, his most recent play, currently at the Manhattan Theatre Club.

Over the past three decades, Fugard has explored the dehumanizing effects of his country's now-dismantled system of apartheid. In his plays—*The Blood Knot*, *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead* and *Master Harold...and the Boys*, to name a few—South Africa's blacks, whites and mixed-race "coloreds" all suffer the consequences of racial segregation. For many, Fugard had come to represent the conscience of South Africa. But the 63-year-old playwright now faces the possibility of being made obsolete by history. Fugard recalls the last vestiges of apartheid leading up to the election of South Africa's first

black president, Nelson Mandela, and the start of the country's first democratic era last year. "After years of living with the nightmare of apartheid, suddenly to be part of this attempt to create a new society is an amazing experience," says Fugard. "I must redefine myself and make myself significant in the new world."

Like most of Fugard's plays, *Valley Song* tells a simple story that is both a metaphor and a parable for his country. Veronica (Lisa Gay Hamilton), a young black woman from a village in the heartland, dreams of moving to the city and becoming a singer. But she is opposed by her loving yet obdurate grandfather. "She has found the courage and the conviction to overcome all of the different obstacles in her path, and she is going to step into an uncertain future," Fugard explains. "The old man has to find the wisdom to let her go."

Given that Fugard himself plays the grandfather in this production (which he also directs), the message that it is time for the older generation to pass the torch on to the younger is poignantly clear. But Fugard also reveals a complex set of emotions about the inevitable transition. He has written a third character, a white South African called the Author, which he also plays. The Author is both the narrator and a character in the story. In one scene, he confesses to the young woman that he has tried to discourage her from following her dreams because

he is jealous of the opportunities open to her in the new era. After all, it is *his* generation that dreamed up the new South Africa.

Writing and performing *Valley Song* has been a powerful experience, Fugard says: "I have never been as nakedly myself on the stage as I am in this play." Playing the dual roles is demanding—not only for Fugard as an actor but for the audience as well. In his earlier plays he attempted to get audiences to look beyond skin color and see the common humanity of his characters. In *Valley Song*, the Author dons a cap, alters his accent and steps into the role of the grandfather. "I am extending my challenge to the audience: 'Come on! You have been looking at me as a white man. Now you have got to believe that I am colored.'"

Fugard says he is already "feeling the itch" to write a new play. "Even as I am performing *Valley Song*, I am living with ideas, one of which may lead to the next play." He reckons his work will become "infinitely more personal," because there is no need any longer for a dissident voice in South Africa. "What follows, I don't know. But I just have this exhilarating sense of my horizons now being so wide and open." He's a rebel in search of a new cause.

—Gerard Raymond