



**M**ONDAY was a red-letter day for South African theatre. In Cape Town, Athol Fugard began rehearsing his *The Train Driver* in the theatre which was named after him three days earlier, on February 12. Bringing this South African story alive with the legendary playwright directing this world premiere are the seasoned Fugard actors Sean Taylor (now living in Australia) and Owen Sejake.

On the same day, in Joburg, at Daphne Kuhn's Old Mutual Theatre on the Square in Sandton, director James Ngcobo started work on his production of Fugard's autobiographical *Master Harold... and the Boys* (1982). A new generation of actors step into the shoes of the famous roles originally created by the late Zakes Mokae and Danny Glover. Daniel Buckland is cast as Hally, with Pakamisa Zwedala (from Cape Town) as Sam and Nat Ramabulana, making his professional stage



**ADRIENNE SICHÉL**

debut, as Willie.

The official opening ceremony of the Fugard Theatre, in Caledon Street, which is the home of Mark Dornford-May and Pauline Malefane's Isango Portobello company, was preceded by a performance of the acclaimed *The Magic Flute Impempe Yomlingo*.

Eric Abraham, the Fugard's producer (who bankrolled the restoration and transformation of this magnificent theatre facility) handed over the key on a red ribbon to Athol Fugard.

The 30-strong Isango Portobello cast erupted into foot-stamping cheers and the audience – which included veteran actor Winston Ntshona, Janet Suzman, Pat Williams, who wrote *King Kong*, the theatre's

patron, Minister in the Presidency Trevor Manuel; Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor; Human Settlements Minister Tokyo Sexwale and Arts and Culture's Lulu Xingwana – was on its feet.

As he accepted the key, an overwhelmed Fugard wept. Fighting back his emotion, the 78-year-old South African and world theatre icon told the audience in reference to the demolished District Six, the area where the theatre is located: "I can assure you, and all the audiences in this house, you will be sitting in the laps of the ghosts of the people who couldn't be here. That is the real celebration."

Interviewed the next morning Fugard, who has homes in San Diego, California, and Nieuw Bethesda, in the Karoo, talked about his long relationship with producer Mannie Manim, the executive director of The Fugard: "I don't think I deserve Mannie. He has such love and trust. He is the first person I turn

to when I have written a new play."

In the US, the Long Wharf Theatre, in Newhaven Connecticut, has also given birth to many of his works. "That's where John Kani and Winston did their first performances before going to Broadway and winning Tony Awards.

"A nice footnote to Mannie and me. I had written my first play in Joburg. A very wonderful person called Benni (Benedicta) Bonnacorsi, who had an acting studio, took me under her wing. I had been doing the play, for 10 or 15 people, in the townships. She said: 'You have good actors and a good story.' She arranged with Brian Brooke to let us use his theatre on a Sunday night, one performance, on the stage and he lent the technicians.

"Mannie was a teenager and he pulled up the curtain on *No-Good Friday*. Fifty years ago. That was the start of it."

Half a century later, that relationship continues long after Manim left The Market Theatre

(which he co-founded with Barmey Simon) and the Baxter Theatre, which he ran till last year.

In the past two years the veteran playwright has been prolific.

*Coming Home* debuted at the Long Wharf Theatre in January last year and was staged by Ross Devenish at the Baxter Studio in June. The British premiere is in July.

In December, *Have you seen us?*, a play about a South African exile in the US, starring Sam Waterston, also premiered in New Haven. This is the first play Fugard has set in America "but there isn't an American in it".

- *The Train Driver* opens on March 19 and runs till April 11.
- *The Magic Flute Impempe Yomlingo* and *The Mysteries Yiimangalis* run in repertory in The Fugard till February 28.
- *Master Harold... and the Boys* at Old Mutual Theatre on the Square. March 16 to April 10.

