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Athol Fugard's inspiration for his work

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Athol Fugard, South Africa's greatest playwright

"What an unruly bunch," says South Africa's foremost playwright Athol Fugard as he surveys his actors and assorted theatre folk, clowning before him. "When I started in the theatre, we had manners." After some laughter, Fugard, a small, grizzled man of 77 who exudes pent-up energy and cheer, holds up one hand; a conductor anticipating the opening notes. "Let's go."

In a soaring rehearsal space that was once a church in Cape Town's District Six, Sean Taylor and Owen Sejake begin a scene from Fugard's next play, *The Train Driver*. A new work from Fugard, South Africa's great chronicler of his country's apartheid past, is an event anywhere. But March 19, when the play, directed by Fugard himself, opens, should be a particularly resonant moment.

It's the first premiere at the newly opened Fugard Theatre, named after the playwright and located in one of Cape Town's most politically contentious areas. District Six was a mixed-race area that was declared a "whites only" neighbourhood by the apartheid government in 1966. Some 60,000 people were forcibly evicted, and much of the area was later razed to the ground.

"You will be sitting in the laps of the ghosts of the people who couldn't be here," Fugard said at the theatre's opening last month. "That is the real celebration."

The creation of the new theatre from the extensive renovation of two warehouses and an adjoining church has been financed by Eric Abraham, a former South African journalist who endured bans and house arrest in his early 20s before escaping to Britain. He became a theatre and film producer, and in 2006, on a visit to South Africa, he met Mark Dornford-May, the English theatre director who together with his wife, the South African opera singer Pauline Malefane, had started a company using actors and singers from Khayelitsha township in Cape Town.

Talking to Dornford-May over dinner, he learnt that the company, which had toured successfully all over the world, had no home in Cape Town. "I identified with this rootless, homeless company," says Abraham, who is married to the Swedish Tetra Pak heiress Sigrid Rausing. "After many bottles of red wine, I woke up the next morning and remembered that I had agreed to underwrite the entire company."

He didn't renege on the promise, supporting and producing Dornford-May's company, now rechristened Isango Portobello, and spending R18m (£1.6m) on the theatre's renovation. "There was only one name I could think of," he says. "There is only one man of magnitude of South African theatre, and that is Athol."

It fell to Mannie Manim, the theatre's new executive director and a close Fugard associate since the late 1960s, to persuade the playwright that this was a good idea. ("I'm not dead yet," he told Manim.) Over the course of several conversations, Fugard said he was working on a new play that could be performed in the new theatre.

"I think he was moved by the idea of the theatre being named after him," says Manim. "And he is a tremendously generous human being. He always wants to give back if you give him something."

Fugard, who was born in 1932 in the Eastern Cape to an Afrikaans mother and an English father, says that as a young man he wanted to write the great South African novel before his wife-to-be, Sheila Meiring, a drama student at the University of Cape Town, introduced him to the theatre. (His one novel, *Tsotsi*, was the basis for Gavin Hood's Oscar-winning 2005 film.)

"I was taking Sheila to auditions," he explains. "At one point she was hoping to get the role of Clytemnestra. She didn't, but I got cast as a shepherd, and that was the start of it all."

The couple married in 1956, the year Fugard wrote his first play, *Klaas and the Devil*, performed by the Circle Players, a small, mixed-race drama group founded by the couple. In the plays that followed, most notably the 1961 *Blood Knot*, which tells the story of brothers (played originally by Fugard and Zakes Mokae) with the same mother but different fathers, he brought the corrosive psychological brutalities of apartheid to vivid life. It was the first time, he says, that black and white performers had appeared together on stage in South Africa.

The play's local fame led to a production in London where, despite a scathing review from Kenneth Tynan, it caused a sensation.

"I had no conscious formulation about being political," Fugard says. "I simply wanted to write about the people I knew. After the Tynan notice, people said, 'Don't be so regional, write for the world'. But who the hell can put the world into a play? If, while I'm writing, I say to myself, 'No one but South Africans are going to understand this', I know I'm doing the right thing."

Fugard went on writing for South Africans and about South Africa for the next 40 years, collaborating with black artists such as John Kani and Winston Ntshona to create *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Island*, as well as the great *Master Harold ... and the Boys*. His principal theme has been the moral blindness perpetuated by apartheid, and his plays, performed all over the world, were no small instrument in making its cruelties known worldwide.

Since the end of apartheid in 1994, Fugard has turned to more autobiographical themes that would, he says, have previously felt indulgent. But in many ways his work is still concerned with the same issues that preoccupied him during the apartheid era.

"What I quickly discovered is that our so-called new South Africa has as much material for a story-teller as the old one," Fugard says. "The landscape hasn't really changed. Who is in power now is different to who was in power then, but the squatter camps grow like cancer, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer. I think the journey that white South Africans have taken has varied enormously. This new play raises the issue of what redemption, if any, is possible."

The Train Driver, which Fugard describes as “perhaps the most important play I’ve written”, was inspired by a South African newspaper article that reported the suicide of a woman, holding her three young children, on the railways tracks near the squatter camps on the Cape Flats.

“Telling stories about myself and my country has led up to this moment,” he says. “In our sunny South Africa, with its rainbow nation and promise for everyone, it’s an act of such total despair that it speaks for itself. I haven’t directed a play for at least 10 years, and had said I wouldn’t ever again. But this play is tremendously significant for me personally; it’s the emotional journey I’ve travelled in dealing with my inherited legacy of South African prejudice, and what you do with that blinkered vision of reality.”

It seems odd, given Fugard’s intense attachment to the landscape and languages of South Africa, his deep identification with its past and present histories, that today he lives mostly in San Diego, California, though he returns frequently to his house in Nieu Bethesda in the Karoo.

“The reason I’m in San Diego is not because I want distance from South Africa but because I want proximity to the people I love,” he says, referring to his wife, daughter and grandson. “But I don’t envy growing up in America. As ugly as aspects of it were, my biggest blessing was to be born a South African.”

‘The Train Driver’ is at the Fugard Theatre, Cape Town, from March 19, www.thefugard.com