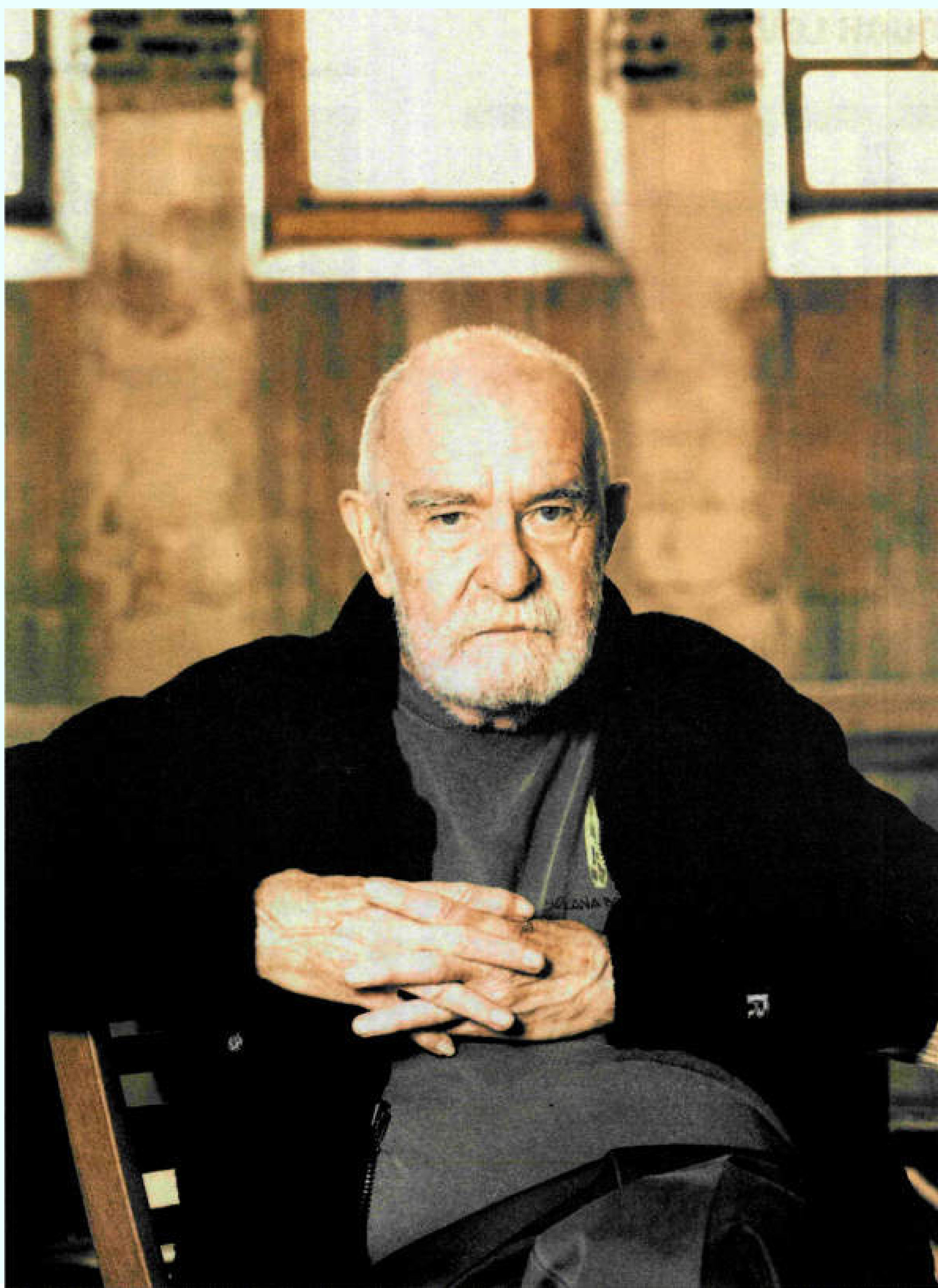
COMING HOME

Master of the MISFIT

Athol Fugard comes home to direct what he says may be his last play in a theatre that bears his name.

By **Lin Sampson**



THE DRIVER: Fugard may be the only famous playwright who could put on a play with one chair as a prop

LET me be honest. I always found Fugard with his ability to romance poverty and his enduring concerns for the moral state of his homeland to be a bit of a bore. His plays were peopled by "rough and tough and from the bluff" characters grinding out a living and *dopping* like mad. He was the magician of the marginalised.

Now he is back home from America, sitting in a space that bears his name, The Fugard, on the outskirts of District Six. Two warehouses and an old church transformed into a 270-seater working space by the Isango Portobello company, it's a place that already beckons the creatively hopeful.

And here is the great man himself — Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard — shorter than expected and looking tired, a little hard of hearing, but still with that intense ability to learn something from each encounter, however brief. He engages the moment, searching your face with his blue eyes with a vigour that is contagious. He once said: "Success relies on the reach that your imagination can make into somebody else's situation."

He has an enormous, almost lyrical, charm and charm is a terrible, terrible thing, because it blows you away and afterwards you feel you have been hypnotised. "Writers are all betrayers," he tells me. "We are cannibalistic, we eat people." Although he seems a confessional man, he believes that all writers need secrets. "I was saying to Sean Taylor (who is playing the part of the train driver in the play) this morning, I don't want to know your secrets. There has to be a part of you that must remain private, the engine of your being."

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He might have left Port Elizabeth but his voice hasn't. It still has roomy vowels and sounds like a train shunting over rusty tracks. All his life it has been the humble and desperate little worlds that fired his imagination.

He is 78, not old by today's standards, but Fugard has been a cultural bushwhacker, cracking into the undergrowth, sawing down exotic plants, saving the indigenous, gazing with awe at nature, lifting stones that no other person dared to.

He was the man who dramatised apartheid for the rest of the world with works such as *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* and *The Road to Mecca*, which told about the crazy cruelty of the time.

The real trouble with Fugard is that — at least in one's mind — he is always one of the characters in his plays: Master Harold in the eponymous play and the protagonist in *Statements After an Arrest under the Immorality Act*. He once said: "I am on the stage all the time."

You expect him to start swigging a bottle of wine and telling you about his mistress and mixed-race child and lack of money and produce a few miserable possessions from a battered suitcase. He is possibly the only famous playwright who could put on a full-length play with one chair as a prop.

He might think he is one of the characters in his plays and it is certainly true many of them contain elements of autobiography, particularly the early plays like *People Are living There* and *Hello and Goodbye*, but this is a mistake. What Fugard is, is a writer. He is a writer of economic, agile prose, which he once described as "a very agile guerilla striking force" with an almost musical sense of pitch.

In *Cousins*, my favourite piece of writing, there is not one phrase out of place, not one false note. His best plays are the ones that mine his own background, with cigarette-powered harpies, corner shops smelling of paraffin and blue soap, with a simplicity and understanding of what it is like to grow up poor. In truth, although his family struggled financially, they were respectably middle class. His mother ran the Jubilee Residential Hotel in Port Elizabeth, a place where Fugard culled much of the colour for his plays.

"The women in my family," he says, "were all powerful." His Afrikaans mother kept the family together and more than that she had a seminal understanding of the genius of her son. Prior to the final exams for his biology degree at UCT, he decided to hitch hike from the Cape to Cairo with his friend, the poet Perseus Adams.

"I wrote to my mother explaining that I was meant to be a writer and that a university degree for which she had slogged and slaved would be useless. She wrote back, 'If that is what you want to do son, go ahead.' Now how many women would do that?

"All of my woman," he says softly, "are an attempt to encapsulate one aspect of her, Milly, Hester, Gladys Bezuidenhout, hers is always the dominant voice."

His new play, *The Train Driver*, follows tradition. It is the story of Pumla Lolwana and her three children, Lindani, Andile and Sesanda, who one day lay themselves down on the railway track between Philippi and Nyanga and are run over by a train.

"The story has haunted me. I tried many different ways of dealing with it. The way I work as a writer is that I have an appointment, made by I don't know who, but an appointment. When I read that article in the Mail & Guardian I knew I had an appointment with that particular story."

Fugard now lives in America "because my daughter, Lisa, and my wife, Sheila, and my grandson, (he says the words in capital letters) Gavin, are there. But I love South Africa and I come here as often as I can. I go to the Karoo, to Nieu Betheseda. I don't hang around the big cities. I will never stop being an Eastern Cape boy.

"When I am in another country I feel foreign. Standing on a street corner, I can't make sense of the faces flowing past me but put me on a street corner in Port Elizabeth and it is a different matter, that young African woman with a shopping bag is heading towards the townships. I know all the possible families she might have cleaned for that day. A writer's quarry is his land."

He says that spiritually and emotionally he is an Afrikaner. "Looking back on my writing I sometimes think I should have written in Afrikaans."

He considers himself a lucky man. "John Kani used to call me 'Lucky'. The journalist Benjie Pogrund was the best man at my wedding and he took me to Sophiatown and I met this incredible galaxy of young writers, musicians and actors, Can Themba, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi. Sophiatown was already under threat. It was bulldozed and turned into Triomf, but the Church of the Resurrection is still standing, a monument that bears witness to the time.

"That is what Eric [Abrahams, benefactor of the Fugard Theatre, in conjunction with Pauline Malefane and Mark Dornford-May] has done with this theatre The building is a combination of reverence for the past and the realisation that this has got to be a working theatre. There is something precious and sacred here."

He opens his hands wide and expands on the idea of chance. "If Zakes Mokae hadn't come into my life, I might not be talking to you now."

He might still be studying motor mechanics, which is how he started life, trying to master the combustion engine with a pile of books —William Faulkner, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams — under his desk.

The theatre has brought together the old crew that functioned during the apartheid years, men like Mannie Manim and Barney Simon. As Janet Suzman says: "What is wonderful is that Athol started his work here in Cape Town and, in a sense, he has brought his work home."

Being back in the old country has filled him with vim.

"I find South Africa full of extraordinary stories. I have sat with actors in America and England and we have been exchanging stories that help us understand where we are going — nothing ever equals the stories that come out of South Africa. I am working with two actors I know intimately, Sean Taylor and Owen Sejake, I couldn't think of any better."

Fugard gave up drink many years ago. "I stopped drinking when I was 50 but I promised the actors I am going to get really drunk on a pot of chamomile tea tonight so that we can start rehearsals with a bang."

After 1994, he feared that his plays would become redundant and in *Sorrows and Rejoicings*, which premiered in London in 2002, he examined the life of a white poet returning from exile.

Has the coming of democracy made him happy? "I haven't lost faith but I am not happy. There is a sense of betrayal of all the promises that were made 20 years ago. We had a chance. Maybe we still have a chance.

"One has to be careful about any misplaced reverence for the past. Look at this building. It was a wreck a few months ago but it has got better. It has a roof. It is going to be a theatre and people are going to come here, and provided that we writers and actors and directors live up to our responsibilities, we can have work on the stage that means something and goes into the matrix of our society."

Are you frightened of dying? "I think about it. I have got five stents in my body, I have just had back surgery, I have artificial lenses in my eyeballs. I am walking around on borrowed parts. My wife and I are very realistic about it. Things could happen suddenly and unexpectedly. What gives me comfort is the thought: 'Well, it's got to happen, so let it happen.'"