

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Painted Rocks: Apartheid Disassembled

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

Athol Fugard is an institution, literary, theatrical, spiritual and political. In addition to being a playwright, he's an actor, director, screenwriter and novelist. When apartheid was raging in South Africa, he dramatized its inequities with brilliance and humanity. As an Afrikaner, he was in the ideal position to do so. When apartheid was officially dismantled at the turn of this century, many wondered if Fugard would be bereft of subject matter.

How wrong that was. The door only opened wider onto seemingly endless new native realities worthy of this playwright's attention.

Now in his older years, Fugard has focused on memoirish plays (the exquisite *Exits and Entrances*), love of country (*My Children My Africa*, *Valley Song* and others) and something less expected: the lingering racism and resentments that has followed apartheid's technical abolition.

One such play is currently at The Fountain Theatre — the seventh by Fugard to receive a world, U.S., West Coast or Los Angeles premiere there. For the past 15 years the tiny Fountain has been Fugard's declared L.A. home of choice. And this world premiere — *The Painted Rocks at Revolver Creek* — fits the political memoir designation. But designations are just a convenient handle. They're limiting. And while *Painted Rocks* is certainly emotional and even close to sentimental, the play is raised up by the rigorous eloquence and compassion of Fugard's writing and the uncompromising clarity of his vision. Especially when that vision is focused on South Africa's painful truths.

Tata (a superb Thomas Silcott) is an aging black man living and working on an Afrikaner estate in 1981, who spends his idle hours painting scattered rocks on a Mpumalanga hillside with the permission of his bosses. He does this in the company of a young black boy named Bokkie (Philip Solomon) who revels in Tata's art and company, encourages the painting and provides the weakening older man with the ambition to go on.



l-r, Thomas Silcott, Philip Solomon and Suanne Spoke in *The Painted Rocks at Revolver Creek*.

Fast forward to 2003 when Bokkie, now a man who goes by “the proper name” of Jonathan Sejake (Gilbert Glenn Brown), returns to Revolver Creek with the intention of completing the painting on the last and largest rock that Tata tackled before he died.

In the lapsed 22 years since Tata's death, apartheid has been abolished, the rocks show neglect, and

the owner of the estate, a no-nonsense Afrikaner named Elmarie Kleynhans (Suanne Spoke) who once indulged Tata and Bokkie, now confronts Thomas Sejake with threats and a gun. She does not recognize him as the boy she had once favored, commanding him to get off her private land or else.

These are the historical facts, but they are not the play. The play is about human interrelationships and how they are perceived from widely divergent points of view. Thomas and Elmarie argue fiercely, each one for his side of the complicated racial equation, each one scoring points that only make clear the complexity of the situation and how hard it is to resolve. They do it with talent and, in the end, respect, under the artful direction of Simon Levy.



Gilbert Glenn Brown and Suanne Spoke in *The Painted Rocks at Revolver Creek*.

Considering the small size of the Fountain stage, it is always a wonder to see how well its creative teams overcome the physical limitations. Jeffrey McLaughlin's set of yellow sand and bright blue sky makes you feel the sunlight and the sense of endless space, especially with a fine assist from lighting designer Jennifer Edwards. Naila Aladdin-Sanders' costumes, Peter Bayne's sound and Dillon Nelson's prop and set dressing (presumably the painted rocks) all contribute to establishing time and place.

But a great deal of credit must be shared by the actors, especially Silcott and Brown, with a special mention for Spoke, who portrays the unavoidably mixed emotions of an aging woman who feels displaced and disrespected in "her" country by the emancipation of the black population — and only distantly connected to the long history that preceded it. As obvious as it may be to others, she does not understand it or her role in it, however accidental. It makes her a woman more to be pitied than blamed. And it exposes all the flaws built into untangling such racially difficult societal knots.

These emotions, alas, are the currency of our times and the price we pay for large historical mistakes. *Painted Rocks* was inspired by the work of a real-life outsider, South African artist, Nukain Mabuza, a black man who created a "Garden of [stone] Flowers" not far from the setting for *Painted Rocks* and who, upon his death, was buried in an unmarked grave. America has dealt and continues to deal with its own large historical mistakes and torments, but, aside from the plays of August Wilson or Matthew Lopez's *The Whipping Man* and parts of Robert Shenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle*, rarely have they been exposed on stage with such compassion and intelligence. It takes a writer born to straddle both sides of the issues to do that and Athol Fugard surely is that man.

Top image: l-r, Philip Solomon and Thomas Silcott in The Painted Rocks at Revolver Creek.

Photos by Ed Krieger.

WHAT: *The Painted Rocks at Revolver Creek*

WHERE: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90029.

WHEN: Fridays, 8pm (dark Nov. 27); Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 3 & 7pm; Pay-What-You-Can

Mondays, 8pm. Ends Dec. 14.

HOW: Tickets \$15-34.95. Seniors (65+) \$27; students with ID, \$20; Rush (15 minutes before curtain, if available), \$15. Call 323.663.3525, or online at www.FountainTheatre.com. Secure on-site parking, \$5.

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