

Performance Review

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Coming Home – by Athol Fugard; dir: by Cordelia Monsey; Venue: The Arcola Theatre, London; Date: Friday 11th June 2010

Athol Fugard has just added to his post-Apartheid plays with a sequel to *Valley Song* (1996). The UK premiere of *Coming Home* is part of a Fugard Festival to commemorate the South African playwright's 78th birthday.

Coming Home takes place 10 years after the events in *Valley Song*, which found Veronica Jonkers leaving the Karoo valley to follow her dream of being a singer in the city of Cape Town. Oupa Jonkers is dead, Veronica his grand daughter, returns from Cape Town, with her five-year-old son Manneljie and everything she owns in a bag, to reclaim the home she left. The old room she shared with Oupa is just as she remembers it, old, dusty and full of memories, right down to the tins lined up on the mantle containing Oupa's famous melon seeds. They are, as Oupa puts it, 'miracle seeds', as they grow into dreams. Veronica tries to convince her son that they will make the room a home again, and own it.

Alfred Witbooi, her simpleminded childhood friend bursts onto the scene, and embraces Veronica with stories of their past together and what she left behind. His excitement at wanting to hear stories of Veronica's success in the city is met with cold, abrupt and evasive statements, which signals all is not well with Veronica, but unfortunately, that is sadly lost on the child-like Alfred. For him, his simple life is complete, now that his best friend has returned. He tells her "the valley was empty; it had no song when you left."

The real meat of the play, of which we have had small glimpses, comes at the end of Act one where the excellence of Fugard shines through. He is very subtle yet acutely pointed in his 'observance' of the toll Aids is having on the New South Africa. Veronica quietly announcing that what we are

seeing is “the ghost of Veronica” in Act one soon becomes a concrete reality as she reveals that she is sick and in fact dying with AIDS, which she contracted in Cape Town.

Veronica is very resolute in the plans she has made for the future of her young son Manneljie, who clearly represents the future of South Africa. The absence of her Manneljie’s father is as a result of a fight in a bar in Cape Town where he met his death. Veronica is under no illusion about what the future holds for her, she is all the boy has and she takes absolute control over preparing for her eventual departure. Her pragmatic decision to marry the dim-witted Alfred draws horror from both Alfred and the now ten-year-old Manneljie whose intelligence surpasses the man Alfred. The two men in her life must learn to get on with each other, because they will only have each other when she is gone. The love they both have for her will keep them together.

Her ‘coming home’ to die is in fact the plight of many of the underclass in South Africa, who cannot afford the drugs that permits them to have a better quality of life. The controversial government policy of not making the drugs available to the mass population who had contracted Aids and rather advocated for a herbal cure is criticized, when simpleton Alfred inquires of Veronica, why she did not get any medication for her illness. Her retort that she was told to ‘eat bananas and vitamins’ is a dig at that unpopular policy and a government that failed to confront the disastrous realities of AIDS.

Fugard places those realities right in front of us in Act two, which opens with a much-withered Veronica spending the best part of the act, literally on her ‘death bed’.

The subtleties continue throughout this production with the return of Oupa in the form of a ghost/spirit, talking to Veronica. On the surface, this scene can be viewed as a tad indulgent, especially in the manner that he recounted Veronica’s childhood, which was addressed in Valley Song. His second and final appearance, in conversation with Manneljie is far more revealing and poignant. In the midst of a dying Veronica and Alfred keeping a vigilant watch by her bedside, there is a conversation between two generations, the old Apartheid South Africa and the future of the New South Africa. Oupa and Manneljie’s dialogue is made all the more significant by the presence of the tin which used to contain melon seeds. Manneljie has claimed the tin and replaced the melon seeds with words he is learning. He intends to ‘plant the words in his “aku”- a place to plant, and watch his words grow, and tell his story. The hope of the future lies in the hands or ‘words’ of the young Manneljie who is proving to be an intelligent boy at the top of his class. His dying mother’s only worry is how to fund his education. This problem is solved unexpected by Alfred, who produces a stash of money he found under Oupa’s bed, money he had hoped to buy the one

thing he wanted since he was a boy, 'a shiny red bicycle'. He confesses his desire to Manneljie and sacrifices it for the boy's future, wanting to do the right thing. This act brings Alfred and Manneljie closer, vowing to respect each other.

The fluid transition from Oupa growing melons seeds in the ground, to them becoming dreams and a song for Veronica, to writing words for Manneljie are a celebration of hope which Fugard 'plants' within this play. The plant motif is carried throughout the play from the seeds in the tin to Alfred taking on the mantle passed down from Oupa. The repeat of the narrative of how a harvest was destroyed except for one small plant that survived the drought could be read as an analogy of how the Aids pandemic has seemingly wiped out a generation. But all is not lost... There is a new generation who have seen the devastation and survived it, making them stronger to face the unknown future. The human lives touched by Aids in its physical affliction and the associated suffering both by the victim and their families is what *Coming Home* is about.

Cat Simmons is strong in this demanding role as Veronica, and navigates with extreme care the difficult journey of a frightened mother who must care for and protect her young son, while hiding a devastating illness. David Judge is delightful as the simpleton Alfred and very touching in his childlike innocence. He carried a lot of the comedy within the play, and a lot of them were at his expense. Nadim Sawalha oozes experience as Oupa in his two appearances and anchors the performance. The Two brothers, Panashe and Taanashe Mwatsiya, who play Manneljie at 5 and 10 hold their own and show great promise as young performers.