

## HONORARY GRADUATE

Harold Athol Lannigan Fugard

Athol Fugard was born on 11 June 1932 in the Karoo village of Middelburg, where his parents at that time ran a general store. The family soon moved to Port Elizabeth. Athol Fugard went to school in that city; thereafter he attended the Technical College, winning in his final year the principal's prize for industry. His mother ran the St George's Park Tearoom in Port Elizabeth during his years at school, and Fugard's play *Master Harold and the Boys* might be thought of as transforming some of the experiences of those years.

In 1950 Athol Fugard went on a scholarship to the University of Cape Town. He read philosophy and the social sciences; but just before his finals and despite having won several class medals he decided not to write his examinations 'lest the degree and its invitation to academic life could become a trap'. Instead, he set off on an expedition up Africa with the poet Perseus Adams, which ended with his signing up at one shilling per day on a British tramp steamer bound for the Far East from Port Said.

On his return to South Africa Fugard took employment in journalism. He attributes his involvement in drama to the influence of his wife Sheila (herself now a prize-winning author), whom he married in 1956. Together, Athol and Sheila created a theatre workshop group, the Circle Players, which performed at the Labia in Cape Town. This venture was a model for his subsequent activities.

Fugard's first full-length play to be produced was *No-Good Friday*. It was written in Johannesburg for the African Theatre Workshop at a time of personal hardship when Fugard was working as a clerk at the Fordsburg Native Commissioner's Court, where, in his words, 'we sent an African to jail every two minutes'. Significantly, its first performance, with Fugard both acting and directing, was in the Bantu Men's Social Centre.

To spell out the context of Fugard's very earliest work in this way is to establish the contours which characterize his subsequent work. The author is time and again the producer or actor-producer; the themes return compulsively to the intolerable inequities of the South African situation; and the driving motive is not personal ambition but the desire to have played a part in the creation or liberation of Black theatre, and the hope that South Africans could be forced to recognize what their society is like. As he himself defines his conviction: 'Anything that will get people to think and feel for themselves, that will stop them delegating these functions to the politicians, is important to our survival.'

Fugard deserves to be honoured in the first instance, of course, as a creative writer. In the opinion of many, he is the best and most powerful contemporary South African writer; he is certainly a figure of world importance in the theatre, as his achievements and list of honours indicate.

*The Blood Knot*, which had its première at Dorkay House, Johannesburg, in 1961, established his reputation not only in South Africa but also abroad, for it was launched in London at the New Arts Theatre in 1963 and was subsequently voted the best play of 1964 by *The New York Times* and transmitted on BBC television in 1967. *The Blood Knot* can be seen as part of an interlinked trilogy with *Hello and Goodbye* (1965) and *Boesman and Lena* (1969) - the latter won an Obie Award for a distinguished foreign play and was directed by Fugard himself at the Royal Court, London, before it was transferred to the Young Vic. *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (of which John Kani and Winston Ntshona were co-creators) was for long his most respected play. It is remembered by many people at this university not only because of a stunning performance of it at The Box here on campus, but also because of the mass arrests of student demonstrators outside, and a chase, with performers and audience trying to evade the police. The play made an enormous impact abroad, being chosen as Play of the Year for 1973 by the London theatre critics after an initial six-week engagement at the Royal Court had extended into nine months. In 1981 *A Lesson from Aloes*, which Fugard directed for the Yale Repertory Theatre while on a fellowship at Yale, won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best new play of the 1980-81 season. In 1984 Fugard was given a Vita 'Special Award' for drama. His play *A Place with the Pigs* was performed initially by the Yale Repertory Company and subsequently at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, and at the Cottesloe (the National Theatre) in London. It was published by Faber and Faber in 1988. His most recent play, *My Children, My Africa*, was premièred at the Market Theatre last year - the first time for some years that there has been a South African first performance of one of his plays. So the roll call of awards and successes could go on; and it could be extended to include Fugard's achievements in the film medium as well, *Harigolds in August* having swept the board at the Johannesburg Film Festival and also having taken a coveted Silver Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival. In short, through the patient and disciplined processes of his art Athol Fugard has borne continuous creative witness to what he has called 'the nameless and destitute of this one little corner of the world', and by so doing he has won world-wide recognition. This university is fortunate that *Master Harold and the Boys* was, very fittingly, one of the first productions to grace the Wits Theatre.

When the Market Theatre production of this play was presented at the Cottesloe Theatre in England it was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement*. The reviewer concluded with the comment that Fugard 'has written an enduring parable of a play. Long may he live in the land he has been given a part in.' They are words one can only echo. Like Alan Paton and Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard chose not to leave South Africa, despite the problems remaining here presents for a writer; for this decision he has had to endure indignities such as the withdrawal of his passport, though he would

surely see such indignities as negligible compared with those which Blacks endure daily.

Not only has Athol Fugard used theatre as an instrument for changing its audiences: he has tried to achieve change in other ways. In 1962, for example, upon the opening of the Johannesburg Civic Theatre he wrote an open letter to playwrights abroad which ultimately resulted in the boycott of segregated performances of their works in this country by the majority of English-speaking playwrights. When subsequently in 1974 he decided that the playwrights' boycott was counter-productive, it was only because of a conviction that it is better 'to go on talking in a compromise situation than be silent', and he added 'Silence is treason in my country'. In this comment lies the explanation of his choosing to remain *here*, never silent.

Undoubtedly, however, the most significant change Athol Fugard has helped to bring about relates to his efforts to liberate Black theatre and provide opportunities for Black talents. John Kani and Winston Ntshona are the best known of those who learnt their craft with the Serpent Players. Others, with acting ability, before and after them learnt their craft with the Circle Players and at the Space. Fugard said of Joan Littlewood's theatre in Stratford East that it was 'not just a group of people doing a play, but an environment becoming conscious of itself'. He told Alistair Sparks in an interview that he looked for 'a special African contribution to theatre'. There is no doubt that he has played a decisive part in helping to bring this about.

Tribute has been paid to Athol Fugard at home and abroad by the conferment on him of honorary degrees of doctor by five universities: Natal, Rhodes, Cape Town, Yale and Georgetown. The University of the Witwatersrand considers itself privileged to join this illustrious group by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*. It does so for his outstanding achievements as a writer; for his contributions to the theatre, and in particular to the Black theatre in this country; and for his unceasing efforts to counter the 'drought in the human heart' which he has so acutely and movingly diagnosed in his own countrymen.