

August 29, 2012

# HUFF POST ENTERTAINMENT

Edition: U.S. ▾



FRONT PAGE POLITICS BUSINESS MEDIA CELEBRITY TV COMEDY FOOD STYLE ARTS BOOKS LIVE | ALL SECTIONS

Entertainment | Celebrity TV Political Hollywood Features Hollywood Buzz Videos

### HOT ON THE BLOG

John Hillcoat  
Harry Shearer

Sen. Ben Cardin  
Jeffrey Sachs

## THE BLOG

Featuring fresh takes and real-time analysis from  
HuffPost's signature lineup of contributors



**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer

GET UPDATES FROM MICHAEL GILTZ

Like 102

# Theater: "Road To Mecca" Proves Bigger Is Not Always Better

Posted: 01/19/12 12:11 AM ET

React > Inspiring Funny Hot Scary Outrageous Amazing Weird Crazy

Follow > Theater , Video , Roundabout Theatre , Athol Fugard , Broadway , Entertainment News

SHARE THIS STORY

---

Get Entertainment Alerts

[Sign Up](#)

---

Submit this story

### THE ROAD TO MECCA \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\* ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY

It's so difficult not to lose your shirt when producing theater that one feels churlish wishing a revival of Athol Fugard's drama *The Road To Mecca* were in a tinier, Off Broadway house. The American Airlines Theatre is hardly sprawling -- it's the fourth smallest house on the Great White Way. And yet even it feels too large for this intimate, modest, three person drama.

Fugard's tale is a simple one. Miss Helen (the great Rosemary Harris) is an elderly widow who lives on her own in an isolated town in South Africa in 1974. Since her husband died 15 years earlier, she's been creating what we would call folk art, fantastical (or monstrous) cement figures that fill her yard and home until there's not enough room for even a radish to grow. We take this on faith since unlike the original New York production, none of those giant, disturbing sculptures are visible to us. All we see is a warm, expansive home with lots of candles, small hand-crafted works throughout, a glittering ceiling (created with ground-up beer bottles) and walls painted with streaks of orange and blue. To us it seems warm and inviting; to her fellow Afrikaners at the time, the word they would use would be closer to unhinged.

Miss Helen receives an unexpected visitor -- the English South African schoolteacher Elsa (a fine Carla Gugino), an English woman of South Africa being considered inherently freer, more modern, less "traditional" than an Afrikaner like Miss Helen. They are also, of course, from different generations. (This is not a play that focuses on race and prejudice, though of course every play of Fugard has such reality woven throughout it.) Miss Helen needs Elsa's support because the local man of the cloth Marius (an excellent Jim Dale) is coming to get her signature on a consent form so Miss Helen can be moved into an old folk's home.

Essentially, we spend the first half of the play hearing hints about a mysterious letter from Miss Helen, tragic events of 15 years ago, problems for Elsa and the looming, threatening appearance of Marius. In the second half, we discover exactly what happened 15 years ago, the contents of that letter, the unhappy state of Elsa's life and a showdown where the three of them sort out their complicated feelings for one another.

### SPONSOR GENERATED POST



### Help Us Write 'The Words'

Quick Read | Comments (26) | 08.20.2012

FOLLOW US

### MOST POPULAR ON HUFFPOST

1 of 2

**Isaac Balloons Into A Hurricane, New Orleans Threatened**

Recommend 651

**Limbaugh's Wild Isaac Conspiracy**

Like 6k

**MAP: Hurricane Isaac's Path Aims For Gulf Coast**

Recommend 216

**GOP Candidate Compares Pregnancy From Rape To What?**

Recommend 18k

**GOP Approves Abortion Ban**

Recommend 7k

**Sylvester Stallone's Half-Sister Dies At 48**

Recommend 282

It's quiet, sometimes affecting and directed smoothly if not piercingly by Gordon Edelstein. The set by Michael Yeargan perhaps could have been more of a presence to give us a better sense of Miss Helen's significance as an artist. The lighting by Peter Kaczorowski felt a little abrupt. Suddenly the stage would seem far dimmer than a moment earlier and then a character would comment that the sun was setting. Snuffing out one candle at one or two points had a similarly dramatic effect, rather than the subtle one called for.

The three actors prove themselves capable of a great deal, even if this production doesn't make the most of Fugard's play. Gugino really impressed me at first, but my confidence wavered as the show went on. Perhaps it's just a modern, savvy attitude towards the elderly, but Elsa seemed rather clueless and mean to Miss Helen at times. And her character's big moment felt tacked on after it seemed to me the business of the show was over. I felt alternately a bit annoyed and a bit confused by this woman. When a show is three quarters of the way over and you're still trying to puzzle out the dynamics between these two characters, something is wrong. (How long have they known each other? Is Elsa like a daughter? A friend? A crutch? And why exactly does Elsa travel so far to visit this woman? And if the friendship of Miss Helen means so much, why does Elsa complain about coming on short notice for what is clearly a crisis?)

Harris had a better time as Miss Helen, but I was never quite sure what we were supposed to think of this woman either. Was she a talented artist? (The show is based on the life of a real Afrikaner whose home is now a national monument, so presumably that's the intent.) For all we know, her sculpture might indeed just be a hobby, albeit an admirable one. Even the intriguing modernist poster for this production is bolder than anything we see from Miss Helen. At times she appears a confused frail old woman while at other points she's a vibrant figure who knows exactly who she is. Characters can contain contradictions of course, but in this case it seemed the show that was confused, not Miss Helen.

But Dale was a revelation to me, never having had the chance to see him onstage before, I think. His Marius is crystal clear every step of the way. We're told he's a scheming man trying to oust Helen from her home. But when he arrives we find a reasonable, if mannered fellow who might just have her best interests at heart. Dale slowly reveals layers and layers to deepen our understanding of this man, as opposed to our whipsaw emotions about the two women.

Each has strong moments and the three of them make it a show worth seeing. But I can't help preferring it was in a smaller space that would allow these three actors (who never overact, mind you) the intimacy the piece calls for. And I wish this production had developed a clearer idea of these two women so we could see Fugard's play more clearly as well.

**The Theater Season 2011-2012** (on a four star scale)

[The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs](#) \*\* 1/2

[All-American](#) \*\*

[All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park](#) \*\*

[The Atmosphere Of Memory](#) 1/2 \*

[Bonnie & Clyde feature profile of Jeremy Jordan](#)

[Broadway By The Year: 1997](#) \*\* 1/2

[The Cherry Orchard with Dianne Wiest](#) \*\*

[Chinglish](#) \* 1/2

[Close Up Space](#) \*

[Crane Story](#) \*\*

[Cymbeline at Barrow Street Theatre](#) \*\*\*

[Dedalus Lounge](#) \* 1/2

 [Deaf Boy Asked To Make Controversial Change \(VIDEO\)](#)

Like 2k

 [The Most Awkward Wedding Photobombs](#)

Like 753

 [PHOTO: Christina Aguilera's 'Your Body' Dress Doesn't Leave Much To The Imagination](#)

Like 201

DON'T MISS HUFFPOST BLOGGERS 1 of 5

 [John Hillcoat](#)  
[Lawless: Reinventing the Gangster](#)

 [Sen. Ben Cardin](#)  
[This Is No Way to Win an Election](#)

TOP VIDEO PICKS 1 of 8

[Surprising New Aniston Rumor](#)

 [Kim K. Wants Hollywood Star](#)

 [Alanis Morissette](#)

MOST DISCUSSED RIGHT NOW 1 of 2


 [Samuel L. Jackson's Shocking Tweets About Isaac](#)

 [Jon Voight Blasts Obama Administration, Mainstream Media](#)

HOT ON FACEBOOK 1 of 3

 [Shia LaBeouf Dropped Acid For His New Film](#)

 [WATCH: Raging Grannies Have Some Words For Todd Akin](#)

 HOT ON TWITTER 1 of 2

*An Evening With Patti Lupone and Mandy Patinkin* \*\*\*

*Follies* \*\*\* 1/2

*Fragments* \*\*\*

*Godspell* \*\* 1/2

*Goodbar* \* 1/2

*Hair* \*\*\*

*Hand To God* \*\*\*

*Hero: The Musical* \* 1/2

*How The World Began* \* 1/2

*Hugh Jackman: Back On Broadway* \*\*\*

*Irving Berlin's White Christmas* \*\*\*

*It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later* \*\*\* 1/2

*King Lear at Public with Sam Waterston* \*\*

*Krapp's Last Tape with John Hurt* \*\*\*

*Lake Water* \*\*

*Leo* \*\*\*

*Love's Labor's Lost at the PublicLab* \*\* 1/2

*Lysistrata Jones* \*

*Man And Boy* \* 1/2

*The Man Who Came To Dinner* \*\*

*Maple And Vine* \*\*

*Master Class w Tyne Daly* \*\* 1/2

*Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park* \*\*\*

*Milk Like Sugar* \*\*\*

*Mission Drift* \* 1/2

*Misterman* \*\* 1/2

*The Mountaintop* \*\* 1/2

*Newsies* \*\*

*Pigpen's The Nightmare Story* \*\*\* 1/2

*Once* \*\*\* 1/2

*Olive and The Bitter Herbs* \*\* 1/2

*On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* \* 1/2

*One Arm* \*\*\*

*Other Desert Cities on Broadway* \*\* 1/2

*Private Lives* \*\*

*Queen Of The Mist* \*\* 1/2

*Radio City Christmas Spectacular* \*\* 1/2

*Relatively Speaking* \* 1/2

*The Road To Mecca* \*\* 1/2

*Samuel & Alasdair: A Personal History Of The Robot War* \*\* 1/2

*The Select (The Sun Also Rises)* \*\* 1/2

*Seminar* \*\*

*Septimus & Clarissa* \*\*\* 1/2

*Shlemiel The First* \*\* 1/2

*Silence! The Musical* \* 1/2

*69 Degrees South* \* 1/2

*Sons Of The Prophet* \*\*\* 1/2

*Sontag: Reborn* \*

*Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* \* 1/2

*Standing On Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays* \*\*

*Stick Fly* \*\*

*The Submission* \*\*

*Super Night Shot* \*\* 1/2

*Sweet and Sad* \*\*

*The Table* \*\* 1/2

*Titus Andronicus at Public with Jay O. Sanders* \* 1/2

*Unnatural Acts* \*\*\*

*Venus In Fur* \*\*\*

*We Live Here* \*\*

*Wild Animals You Should Know* \*\* 1/2

*Zarkana* \*\*

**NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011**

*Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame* \*\*\* 1/2

*Central Avenue Breakdown* \*\* 1/2

*Crazy, Just Like Me* \*\*\*

*Cyclops: A Rock Opera* \*

*Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon* \*\* 1/2



**thatkevinsmith**

My daughter was born out of wedlock. In Senate candidate Tom Smith's mind, this is somehow akin (or Akin) to rape...

<http://t.co/yIWstbn>

[Retweet](#)



**antderosa**

Paul Ryan: Rape is a method of conception <http://t.co/KMgF2jWC>

[Retweet](#)

**HUFFPOST'S BIG NEWS PAGES**



[Snooki](#)



[Smoking](#)



[Ask The Parent Coach](#)



[Chris Christie](#)



[Arizona Politics](#)



[Natural Disasters](#)



[Wisconsin](#)



[Shadow Conventions 2012](#)



[Fox News](#)

[MORE BIG NEWS PAGES »](#)

[F---ing Hipsters](#) \*\*  
[Ghostlight](#) \*\*  
[Gotta Getta Girl](#) \*\* 1/2 for staged reading  
[Greenwood](#) \*  
[Jack Perry Is Alive \(And Dating\)](#) \* 1/2  
[Kiki Baby](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Kissless](#) \* 1/2  
[Madame X](#) \*\*  
[The Pigeon Boys](#) \*\*\*  
[Time Between Us](#) \* 1/2  
[Tut](#) \*\*

#### FRINGEFEST NYC 2011

[Araby](#) \*  
[The Bardy Bunch](#) \*\*  
[Books On Tape](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Civilian](#) \*\*  
[Hard Travelin' With Woody](#) \*\*\*  
[Leonard Cohen Koans](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
[The More Loving One](#) \*\*  
[The Mountain Song](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
[Paper Cuts](#) \*\*\*  
[Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Pearl's Gone Blue](#) \*\*\*  
[Rachel Calof](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending](#) \*\*  
[2 Burn](#) \* 1/2  
[Walls and Bridges](#) \*\*  
[What The Sparrow Said](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Yeast Nation](#) \*\*\*

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called [Popsurfing](#) and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

Follow Michael Giltz on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz](http://www.twitter.com/michaelgiltz)

[More in Entertainment...](#)

---

[Robin Williams As  
Dwight D.  
Eisenhower In...](#)

[Fall Movie Preview  
2012: 'The Hobbit,'  
'Django...](#)

[Samuel L. Jackson:  
'Unfair' Hurricane  
Isaac Avoid...](#)

[Lynyrd Skynyrd's  
RNC Gig Canceled  
Amid Hurricane...](#)

## Comments

0

Pending Comments

0

[View FAQ](#)

Comments are closed for this entry

View All

Recency | Popularity

