

THE ROAD TO MECCA by Athol Fugard
Dramaturgical Notes composed by Judy Braha, Thomas Martin, and Todd Siff

SETTING

Time: Summer, 1976 rekindling Autumn, 1974

Place: Nieu Bethesda, South Africa

MISS HELEN

Helen Elizabeth Martins ('Miss Helen') is considered South Africa's foremost Outsider Artist. Born in December of 1897 in Nieu Bethesda, Miss Helen was the youngest of six children. In 1919, she moved to the Transvaal to work as a teacher. After her brief marriage to Willem Johannes Pienaar dissolved, Miss Helen returned to New Bethesda in 1928 to care for her ailing parents. After her mother's death in 1941 and her father's death in 1945, Miss Helen became increasingly reclusive and isolated from the local community. It is at this time that she began her life as an artist. It is said that she lay in bed one night, considering how dull and grey her life had become, when she resolved, there and then, that she would strive to bring light and color into her life. There was no overall plan, but what began as decoration soon developed into a fascination with the interplay of reflection and space, of light, dark, and different colors. When the interior of the house was virtually completed Miss Helen applied her imagination to the world beyond her door, transforming her garden into what became known as the Camel Yard. She was particularly inspired by biblical texts, the poetry of Omar Khayyam, and the works of William Blake. With the help of various assistants she continued to create her "Mecca" until 1976, when she decided, in part due to her failing eyesight and arthritic hands, to end her own life.

Miss Helen's Owl House and surrounding Camel Yard contain over 300 concrete and glass sculptures. In the Owl House, Miss Helen created sun-faces, owls, and other images, which were set against a luminous backdrop of walls and ceilings coated with elaborate patterns of crushed glass embedded in bands of brightly colored paint. The Camel Yard is filled with biblical figures, Oriental saints, mystical symbols, mythical figures, birds, owls, mermaids, monsters, and castles made from cement, empty bottles, and pieces of glass, which all face East towards Mecca.

After Martin's death in August 1976, the Owl House fell into disrepair. After an outcry of concerned individuals, the ownership of the property was transferred to the town of Nieu Bethesda. In 1996, The Owl House Foundation was formed as a non-profit organization to provide a more consistent and locally based administration for a significant cultural heritage and tourist attraction. Once shunned by the residents of the village, today Miss Helen's Owl House and Camel Yard are visited by over 130,000 people each year. They have ironically become the central source of livelihood for the entire town of Nieu Bethesda.

ATHOL FUGARD

Once identified by Time Magazine as “the greatest active playwright in the English – speaking world,” Athol Fugard is known for his deeply rooted and controversial anti-apartheid dramas. Born in 1932, in Middleburg, a small village in the Karoo region of South Africa, and raised in Port Elizabeth since the age of three, Fugard deems himself the mongrel son of an English-speaking father of Polish/Irish descent and an Afrikaner mother. As a playwright, Fugard has been subjected to government surveillance, restricted in his play development and travel by the South African government, and has been able to collaborate with many native, black South Africans to create confrontational and necessary theatre about the curse and price of apartheid both in South Africa and abroad. Fugard has written over thirty plays and continues to write today. Some of his most famous plays include: *The Blood Knot*, *The Island*, *Master Harold and the Boys*, *A Lesson From Aloes*, *My Children! My Africa!*, and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*.

THOUGHTS ON *The Road to Mecca*:

“For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” Nelson Mandela

“Artists are driven to forge their version of the truth even when they have no hope of an audience, even when they must work with the most humble materials in the middle of nowhere.

Artists are dangerous because they won't deviate from that truth, no matter what pressure to conform is applied by the society around them. Artists are frightening to those who would suppress freedom because to be an artist is to exemplify freedom.” - “Athol Fugard's ‘Road to Mecca’ Examines the Core of Artistry” Frank Rich, NY Times 4/13/88

“...(we were) all dabblers in that most mysterious of all the processes of the soul, the one and only true alchemy- the transformative- trying to turn the substance of our very ordinary lives into something enduring and special...that is our hopeless and splendid endeavor our attempt to defeat the high imprisoning walls of our mortality.” - *COUSINS: A Memoir* by Athol Fugard

The soul selects her own society-

Then- shuts the door-

On her divine majority-

Present no more.—Emily Dickinson (in Fugard's introduction, *The Road To Mecca*)

“Although most of Fugard's plays are set in South Africa...they tackle transcendent and eternal human issues beyond the domestic sphere and envisage a society based on racial equality and reconciliation- a society that accepts the existence of the ‘Other’.” - Dr. Isam M. Shihada

“Fugard's own leanings, as illustrated in many of his plays, are at one with the politically proactive engagement of Elsa Barlow even as they are simultaneously at one with Miss Helen's reclusiveness and religious devotion to her artistic vision... That these two women cling to each other in challenging symbiotic friendship bespeaks the complementary polarities of Fugard's own psyche and life even as it bespeaks the seemingly disparate but complementary extremes of South African life and culture.” - *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard*, Albert Wertheim

“My hidden agenda in writing this play was an attempt to understand the genius, nature, and consequences of a creative energy.” - Athol Fugard

The “perception of myself as a political writer disturbs me. An attitude like that closes off an individual to an important thing I have tried to do. [...] I’ve tried to celebrate the human spirit—its capacity to create, its capacity to endure, its capacity to forgive, its capacity to love, even though every conceivable barrier is set up to thwart the act of loving.” - Athol Fugard

“I never thought of this world as having seasons...certainly not soft ones. To me it has always been a landscape of extremes, too hot or too cold, too dry or else Miss Helen is writing to me about floods that have cut off the village for the outside world. It reminds me of something I once read where the desert was described as ‘God without mankind’.”

- Elsa Barlow, *The Road to Mecca*

“‘Visionary environments’ ...are, in the main, created by those with little or no formal art education, who find themselves being driven by a vision and a creative force that increases in intensity over the years. Dubuffet (the French artist who coined the phrase "art brut" or "outsider art") saw that unique and powerful art, completely uninfluenced by cultural norms, could be produced by a whole range of idiosyncratic and strongly individual creators operating entirely on their own. An art as natural and free flowing as a child's but with the intensity, sophistication and full commitment of an adult.” - *Fantasy Worlds*, text by John Maizels

"My imagination has carried me on a journey from the past to the present...I dare not question where I go from here. I do not predict big plans for my art...instead...I work. I do the best I can. I am grateful to have found the place where I can fulfill my dreams and share them with the passing scene...for as long as I can." - Marta Becket, artist

“Helen’s work embodies a desire for distant and exotic locations, yet her world was painfully geographically constrained.” - *This is My World*, Sue Ross

“Dying isn’t the problem. Living is the problem. That is why we must live our lives passionately and to the full. My agony would be to ‘live dying’ without being able to work.”

- Purportedly said by Miss Helen Martins

Ah Fill the cup: What boots it to repeat
How time is slipping underneath our feet:
Unborn To-morrow, and dead Yesterday
Why fret about them if TODAY be sweet!

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam

Quatrain #37 (inscribed on Miss Helen's fence, The Camel Yard)

"Even Helen's death did not stop the stories about her and her Owl House. There are tales about the house that suggest the uncanny continuation of her presence.” - Koos Malgas

READ MORE ABOUT IT: Sources and Websites for Further Investigation:

<http://www.southafrica.info/about/arts/owl-house-251005.htm>

http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/offthemap/html/travelogue_artist_8.htm?true

<http://www.nieubethesda.info/>

<http://quazen.com/arts/visual-arts/visionary-environment-helen-martins-and-the-owl-house-of-nieu-bethesda/>

<http://hubpages.com/hub/Owl-House---a-Visionary-Environment>

http://www.courttheatre.org/season/article/athol_fugard_biography/

<http://www.enotes.com/valley-song/author-biography>

http://www.browsebiography.com/bio-athol_fugard.html

<http://www.suite101.com/content/the-owl-house-in-nieu-bethesda-a210541>